Part 1

Chapter One

Ashton took a step forwards then, closer to the mirror, eyes wide as he stared at his reflection. Behind him, his teacher stood leaning on a hip, her arms folded, and a teasing smile playing about her lips as she watched him closely.
Ashton leant forwards; eyes wide as he looked at his own face.
He had a mask of sparkling pink painted around his eyes, fading to the natural colour of his skin, with bold yellow lips.
Ashton lifted a hand to his face but didn't touch the makeup for fear of smudging it.
The bright colours suited him, suited his pale skin, his blue eyes, and his false pure-white hair, which was tied as a ponytail over his shoulder, reaching his hip and tied in red ribbons. He wore a black close-fitting garment that covered his chest and was high-necked but left his shoulders and stomach bare. There were tight black sleeves on his arms, he wore black shorts, and on his feet were high black stilettoes.
His heel clicked on the smooth floor as he took another step towards the mirror, eyes roving all over himself as he observed his reflection.
'Oh my god' he gasped, managing to speak at last. 'I look *incredible*.'
'You look fierce' his teacher said behind him, raising an eyebrow.
'I'm so happy' Ashton uttered, his body beginning to shudder as he balled his fists to his chest, shoulders hunched.
His teacher let out a sigh, unfolding her arms and grabbing a box of tissues on the side, stepping up to him.
'Don't smudge your makeup' she said to him, 'it looks too good to ruin.'
'Thanks Michelle' Ashton mumbled, dabbing at his eyes tenderly. 'I just feel so happy when I am here.... I feel like I am truly at home.'
'I know you do.'
'I just hate having to keep this a secret. Its who I truly am....oh...' he breathed. 'My family would be horrified if they ever found out.'
His teacher Michelle turned away then, folding her arms again as she looked towards the poles in the dancing studio.
'I've thought of a great name of you' she said offhandedly.
'Hu?' Ashton mumbled.
'Hotstuff. That will be your stage name.'
Ashton stared back at her for a moment, before breaking into a smile. 'That's awesome' he breathed, 'I love it.'
'Good' Michelle frowned at him, tapping him on the shoulder. 'Now straighten up, stand tall and don't slouch. Try to be more the self you are when you are dancing, not the fragile little flower I see you as every other time.'
'I don't mean to be so weak...'
'Stand up straight' Michelle snapped at him then, and Ashton jumped, tensing at the sudden sharp tone.
She glared at him, and he stared back at her timidly, before dipping his head.

Ashton lowered his arms, relaxing his body and lowering his shoulders.
He let out a sigh. The next time he raised his head, he stood more confidently now, with a smile upon his face, and eyes shining happily.
'That's more like it' Michelle spoke gently to him. 'You're far more handsome when you smile. Now come on' she said to him. 'Let's do some stretches, and remember, not to push yourself to hard. You won't gain anything and you'll end up only hurting yourself.'
'I know' Ashton replied delicately, 'and I'm sorry, I'll try to do better next time.'

Nearly an hour later, and Ashton's session was finished. He had washed his makeup off and had put on his regular clothes again.
Now he made his way through the busy streets to his manor home, keeping his head down as he went.

My name is Ashton Lucius Miles, and I am a lord, born of purple blood. My family is large, and we as children are born into roles, and expected to follow the path laid out to us by our parents.
My sister married for financial benefit, a decision that was not her own, and I know that one day the same will be expected of me. I am older than my sister, but I have not been useful as a piece to marry off, not yet anyway, because of my preferences, which are not exactly a secret anymore.
But I want none of that, all I want is to live a normal life, and to dance. That's all I want; I want my life to be my own.

Ashton clutched his bag to him, standing at the traffic lights by the side of the road, and waiting for the man to turn green.
There were several people either side of him waiting to cross the road also, and as Ashton stood there, he noticed an older man watching him.
Ashton was used to this, because of the way he dressed. He was of purple blood, a lord, and people always treated him differently, be it good or bad. He always drew attention. High borns lived in a different world to the 'common' folk, and they stood out amongst the others, and not just for their clothes, but the way they spoke and acted. It was obvious.
Ashton always resented this about his life, but never spoke his thoughts out loud to anyone, save for his sister.
Ashton glanced towards the man who stared at him, meeting his gaze only briefly before looking away, clutching the strap of the bag he carried over his shoulder a little tighter, shoulders hunched.
When the traffic slowed and the man turned green, Ashton was the first to make his way across the road, moving quickly at a jog.
He was eager to get home, and always felt a little out of place in the outside world. The only times he felt at ease, was around people he knew, or when he was dancing.
Ashton began to feel a little sad then, a little anxious. He loved to dance, it lit a fire in his heart, but he also was afraid at the same time, and lived in fear of his family one day finding out that he snuck out often to do such a thing.

No one knew, save for his teacher Michelle, her two daughters who also danced, his friend Lucile, the only other male dancer Ashton knew, and his sister, whom he adored above all else.

Ashton walked at a steady pace as he made his way back home, keeping his eyes fixed firmly ahead of him, trying to ignore the world around him.
His home was a large manor situated near the centre of the city. It was a beautiful place, a little piece of paradise within the bustling concrete jungle.
Ashton like this city, he liked it very much, despite how it made him feel so uneasy. It was not the city itself, but the people. He wished he could be invisible, so people would look straight past him, so they would not stare. That way he could truly appreciate the place around him. As things were now, he could only really admire the city through the windows of his home, from an environment where he felt safe. The only other time he experienced it was when he was travelling through, as quickly and discreetly as he could as he headed to the dance studio, his secret place.
So many hours he had spent sitting beside the open window, watching the sky begin to darken, and the city gradually beginning to glow ever brighter.
He loved his home, and he loved his family, however, his life was far from perfect. There was constant doubt gnawing in his mind, now more than ever. So much was expected of him.
Ashton hurried along, not slowing in his pace.
He left the busy streets behind him, crossing an empty courtyard that had no purpose other than to maintain some sort of gap between the little gate, one of the smaller entrances to the manor, and the rest of the city.
Ashton reached it, bringing out from his jacket, hidden on his person, a little key.
He unlocked the gate quickly, slipping through and closing it after him, locking it again once he was inside. There were several entrances onto the property. This was one of the more discreet ones.
He turned then and looked up the steep set of concrete steps, facing now the grand building some distance away, resting atop a little hill. The grand manor was slightly elevated above the rest of the city. From there, you could look down at the rest of the world that surrounded.
Ashton dipped his head again, making his way up the steps quickly, heading towards his home. He was panting a little by the time he reached the top step, continuing his trek up the gentle incline of the slope. He reached one of the conservatories at the back of the manor, it was a large and comfortable structure. This was one of his favourite places to be. He would sit here for hours, mostly on rainy days, listening to the patter on the glass. But these would only be background noises for him, and he would for the most part hardly be aware, as he would typically be absorbed in the stories that he read.
Ashton loved to read, it was his passion, second only to dancing. And while most parents would likely encourage such behaviour, his wild parents, mainly his hyperactive mother, would often berate him for having his nose in a book. Though it was always done so in a loving and playful manner. He would take no notice of them, his mother would jokingly remark about how he would ignore real life, to read fairy tales and fantasies.
Ashton would much of the time, just smile silently to her in response, and turn away, back to the pages that he held.

Just like the patter of the rain that he hardly noticed on those cloudy days when he sat in the conservatory, he hardly noticed her loud voice either.
'Oh, Ashton darling, I'm just playing' she would say, before swooping down to kiss him on the cheek. 'There's no need to take everything so seriously.'
'Hmm,' would be his response much of the time.
Ashton opened the conservatory door, slipping in quietly and closing the door gently after him. He made his way across the large floor-space, glancing briefly towards the great cushioned seat in the corner that he would often sit in.
It was a fine day today, and the conservatory was cool and comfortable. On darker days, it would be warm and comfortable. Ashton's entire life had been that of comfort, but that didn't mean he didn't have his worries.
Ashton left the conservatory, entering the main part of the home.
He had not long closed the door behind him, stepping out into a larger cavernous room, when he was set upon by a familiar figure, pouncing out at him from behind a bookshelf and grabbing his shoulders from behind.
'My baby has returned!'
'Mum' Ashton huffed indignantly, turning around and trying to dislodge her from him, but she held onto his arm tightly now, hugging and not letting go.
'I was beginning to miss you my *sweet little angelic buttercup*. I love my baby boy so very *much!*'
Ashton frowned in mild annoyance at this. He was used to being man-handled by his mother, though it would still grate on his nerves at times.
'Maya please' his father said then, stepping in from the other room. 'Stop now or you will suffocate the boy.'
His mother finally let go of him, but not before giving him several harsh pecks on the cheek.
'Have you been leaving the property again?' his mother said in mock irritation. 'You know I don't like it when you leave dear.'
'I'm not going to stay trapped indoors forever mum' Ashton huffed, wiping his cheek where his mother had kissed him.
'Son' his father, whose name was Isaac spoke seriously then. 'It's a dangerous world out there…. you have no idea what sinister things are lurking around every corner. Never turn your back on them my boy, never let your guard down, for they are waiting for the perfect opportunity….*to pounce!*' he made a dramatic motion then, and his mother gasped at this as if in fright.
Ashton had heard this speech before, his father would often talk about the supposed dangers of the city outside their home, and how dangerous the corners of every building could potentially be. But he had never said what or who the danger might actually be. Ashton had asked before several times when he was young, but in the end gave up asking.
He was used to his parents' eccentric tendencies, and ignored them for the most part.
It's just how they were. It was how they had always been.
'We have some exciting news for you!' his father announced, waving his arms theatrically then.
Ashton only watched him calmly, waiting for his father to continue as his mother squealed in delight like a child, bouncing up and down and clapping her hands in excitement.
'You have a visitor waiting for you!' his father said. 'In your bedroom!'
'What? Why in my bedroom?' Ashton asked a little uncertainly now.

'You will surely find out if you go…..*to the bedroom!*' Isaac bellowed comically, as his mother began to giggle and twirl on the spot.
Ashton let out a patient sigh.
'Come now my love!' Isaac said to Maya then in his booming voice, and she looked towards him as she always did, with pure love and a sort of childish glee she had never quite grown out of. 'Those cookies would be just about done! We can watch them brown together, then we can water the plants! Come my love! *To the kitchen!*'
They ran off together then, his mother holding his father by the crook of his arm. After a few seconds they began to skip.
Ashton watched until they were out of sight, and the silence grew then into something peaceful. He let out a sigh, dipping his head slightly.
He knew that his mother must have been watching out for him. She would often keep her eyes on the windows when he was not around, and if she saw him heading home by one of the many paths, she would hurry to meet him, but not before giving him a scare first.
Ashton loved his parents, but they exhausted him sometimes. He didn't understand how they could both have so much energy. He was nothing like either of them, not only in his personality and demeanour, but his appearance also. He looked totally different from either of his parents. He had asked one time long ago, if he was adopted.
In response, his mother had produced his birth certificate and numerous books filled with baby pictures, most of them embarrassing. His mother had picked out one of him naked in the bath at one year old. Ashton had snatched it from her, slamming it back into the book and closing it, face bright-red. She would only laugh harder at his awkwardness.
Ashton stood now in the silent room. He swallowed a little nervously then, craning his head back up to the stairs beside him.
His room was on one of the higher levels. And apparently there was someone waiting for him, *in his bedroom.*
Ashton clenched his teeth nervously, breathing slowly to try to calm himself.
He wondered who on earth it might be.
Without allowing himself to dwell on it too much, he moved over to one of the staircases, grasping the banister lightly, and ascending the steps to find out.

Chapter Two

Ashton walked at a steady pace, not wanting to rush, and at the same time wanting to run as fast as he could to find out who was waiting for him. He very suddenly very nervous and uncertain. He had no idea who it could be, and was not expecting anyone. He feared that this may be an unpleasant surprise. His parents had seemed excited however. Though that didn't mean much. They were typically excited about most things.
Ashton reached his room, slowing to a stop before his door.
He drew a steady breath, swallowing the lump in his throat before reaching a hand out towards the door.
He opened it carefully, stepping in.

Ashton peered around the door towards his bed, where he saw a figure lying there on their side with their back to him.
Ashton closed his mouth then, swallowing again.
He allowed the door behind him to swing shut, and upon the sound of the door closing, the figure sat up and glanced around.
'Ashton!'
'Alicia?'
She swung her legs off the edge of the bed, skipping towards him as fast as she could and sweeping him up in a tight hug.
Ashton hesitated for only a moment, caught by surprise.
A few seconds later he raised his arms, hugging her back, gently at first, and then tighter, closing his eyes contentedly and sighing.
'Its so good to see my dear sister again' he sighed, speaking quietly.
His sister was sixteen, Ashton was seventeen. He had not seen his sister for over a year as she had married at a very young age. As was expected of her. It was typical for high-borns to do this, for men to carry on their family's name, and for women to have children. Ashton of course had been expected to have been married by now, but because of his preferences, things in his case had been a little different. Though it had never really been much of a secret. When he did admit it at last and get it out in the open, his mother simply replied, 'oh that's nice. But why didn't you bring dessert, you said you were going to the kitchen to get it? I am upset now.'
His father too had replied in a similar manner, forlorn at the fact of his missing dessert.
Ashton had only laughed at this. It had been a good rest of the day after that.
Alicia giggled excitedly.
'And its wonderful to see you again too' Alicia beamed back at her brother, finally releasing him from her hug but not letting go fully as she stepped back, holding both his hands in hers now and bobbing on the balls of her feet, grinning at him merrily. 'I wanted to surprise you!' she spoke excitedly.
'I had no idea you would be here' Ashton fumbled.
'Well duh' she rolled her eyes. 'If you did it wouldn't be a surprise now would it?'
'Oh right' Ashton laughed awkwardly. 'Yeah that makes sense.'
She leaned forward quickly then and gave him a peck on the cheek, hugging him again tightly one last time, before stepping back with a contented sigh.
'How is your husband?' Ashton asked with a smile. 'And your children?'
'My husband is fine' Alicia beamed back joyfully. 'And my twin babies both are doing incredibly well. It will be their birthday soon, so I came here only to visit quickly. I have to return home soon.'
'Why did you come all this way then if you have to leave so soon?' Ashton asked, sounding worried and a little disappointed.
He had not seen his sister in so long, to see her again had been wonderful, but to hear she would be leaving so soon broke his heart.
'I have something I need to tell you' Alicia said, her expression dampening slightly, her brow furrowed, and tone growing serious. 'Can we go outside to talk? I would like to wander the garden; I miss it, and after all…. it's so beautiful today.'

Ashton scratched his palms nervously as he and his sister walked, side by side along the gravel path through the garden. It was a secluded area they wandered now, and for the briefest of moments, Ashton and Alicia existed alone in their little world together. Just the two of them. And that is how he liked it.
'This was the most wonderful surprise' Ashton spoke after a time, breaking the silence.
His sister turned to face him then with a smile, her eyes shining brightly.
'The truth is, I was a little nervous at first, maybe even a little scared' Ashton admitted to her. 'I was wondering who on earth it could be inside my bedroom. I didn't think I would be seeing you again anytime soon. You really caught me off-guard.'
Alicia laughed a little then, her voice so beautiful and tranquil as she touched a hand to her chest lightly.
'Oh you. You always did amuse me' he chuckled.
'What did I say?' Ashton fumbled, speaking a little uncertainly now.
'Nothing my dear brother' Alicia sighed, reaching her hands out towards him.
She grasped his face lightly, leaning forward to kiss him gently on the forehead.
'It's been far too long since we've last seen each other.'
She turned ahead again, continuing to walk.
Ashton walked by her side, maintaining her gentle stroll.
'You still have not yet met my children' Alicia said to him, head a little dipped now as she held her hands together before her.
'No' Ashton spoke sadly. 'I have not.'
'One day you will see them' Alicia spoke enthusiastically then, eyes lighting up with joy. 'It is such a long way to travel to my home but….' She frowned slightly. 'I think it will be worth it. They really are wonderful children.'
'Well' Ashton said, looking askance towards her with a smile. 'If they are related to my sister, then I know they would be wonderful.'
Alicia grinned widely at her brother at that, looking ever so beautiful in the light.
'They are both very lively' she went on. 'I am afraid that they are going to grow up with the same level of energy as our parents.'
'Then they would be a handful' Ashton chuckled lightly.
'They are already a handful now' Alicia grinned.
Ashton smiled widely at his sister. He had not seen her in the longest time, but being by her side like this brought back all the old and familiar memories and feelings.
He felt suddenly more at home.
'Ah I really wish I could see them' Ashton grumbled, turning away, a slight frown upon his lips. 'I feel really sad that I have not met them yet, guilty even.'
'Don't feel like that' Alicia spoke softly, reaching out to him and brushing a strand of hair behind his ear. 'It's just the way things are. You will see them one day. I've told them both a lot about you. All wonderful things of course.'
Ashton smiled at that, eyes shining bright.
'They are still babies' he said to his sister doubtfully. 'They won't understand what you are saying.'
'They will one day' Alicia gleamed at him, leaning forwards towards him playfully with her hands upon her hips. 'I want them to know about you as early as possible. I talk about you every day.'

Ashton smiled warmly at her, blushing a little awkwardly now, Alicia smiled lovingly back. Then her smile dropped a little.
Ashton felt a little twinge in his heart, a little nervous and uncertain.
'What's wrong?'
'I have some news for you' Alicia explained. 'It's the reason I came all this way. Just to tell you. Mother and father plan to marry you off soon, within the next few weeks.'
Ashton felt like he had been stabbed in the heart, his throat suddenly went dry.
He knew this day would come, it was expected of him, as it had been expected of his sister when the time had come. Because he was a highborn of purple blood. He was to be used as a piece to marry off, like a pawn. Ashton knew he would normally have been married by now, but because of his preferences, this had been held off.
Now, inevitably, the moment had caught up with him.
Ashton slowly raised his hand, running his fingers slowly through his black hair.
He wondered who on earth his parents had found, and as he drew a slow and steady breath, he raised his head to his sister again.
'Who…' he uttered, voice fragile and barely audible. 'Who is it?'
'His name is Edmund Rodrigo Quartz' Alicia replied seriously, standing with her hands folded together before her.
'Edmund?' Ashton mumbled; brow furrowed as he stared at his sister hard. 'It's…. a man?'
'It is' Alicia gleamed happily at him. 'Mother has at last found another man willing to marry you, willing to marry another man. I think it goes without saying that he is of purple blood too.'
Ashton continued to stare at his sister in shock, unable for the longest time to find his voice.
Alicia simply watched him, waiting for him to gather himself.
Eventually Ashton closed his mouth, swallowing with difficulty.
His throat felt dry as a bone, and his voice came out as a little hoarse as he spoke his next words.
'Oh…. oh' he said.
Alicia sighed at him, tilting her head slightly.
'I am sorry' she said to him, speaking sincerely. 'I know you never wanted to marry. But you know how things are.'
'Yeah' Ashton whispered, hanging his head now. 'I know.'
He let out a sob then, hands going to his face, hiding his tears away.
'Oh Ashton' his sister soothed, closing the distance between them and holding him in a firm embrace. 'I know how it must be for you. I was not too keen to be married myself. But he turned out to be wonderful for me. He is kind and…. oh, Ashton please don't cry.'
'I'm fine' Ashton gasped, raising his head and smiling to his sister, tears welling in his eyes. 'This is all just a little overwhelming for me.'
'Its going to be alright' Alicia said to him, grasping him firmly either side of his face before letting go. 'I promise you. Mother is doing everything she can to make you happy. But you *have* to be married. You know how things are' she said again.
'I know' Ashton breathed. 'I know…' he smiled awkwardly again, a single tear rolling slowly down his cheek. 'I just…sometimes wish how nice it would be…. I mean…. I think of how nice it would be if…you know…these sorts of things weren't expected of us. If we could just be left alone to live our own lives… I don't know…' he trailed off. 'It would be nice.'
'We just live different lives' his sister told him.
'I still wonder what it would be like' Ashton mumbled.

‘It would be harder.’
‘Would it?’ Ashton raised his head. ‘How would you know?’
‘Ok I guess I don’t’ she chuckled lightly. ‘It would just be different. Harder in a different kind of way I guess. Think of it this way, whatever happens to use we are more security than the common folk. Our families are so tightly bound together, and we have money to stabilize us, our children can go to the best schools. And so on…’ she finished.
‘I…don’t think I can have children’ Ashton mumbled timidly.
‘You could always adopt’ Alicia spoke merrily.
‘I guess. I still think it would be nice to be without all of this’ Ashton went on. ‘I mean…it must be nice to marry who you want, not who you are told to by your parents, not who you are expected to marry by others. Some people don’t want to marry at all. Some never do. I don’t know…it must be nice to be in control of your own future. And besides’ Ashton sighed wearily. ‘It would be nice to be able to dance as I want freely, without having to do it in secret, without sneaking around like a crook. It makes me feel guilty, and I don’t know why. I know I’m not doing anything wrong but...’
He looked back at his sister then, who was watching him intently.
‘You *must* keep what I have told you an absolute secret’ Alicia said to him. ‘Mother and father plan to tell you tonight at dinner. But you have to act surprised.’
‘Oh’ Ashton grumbled. ‘Ok…’

Chapter Three

‘Whaaaaaat?’ Ashton gasped in mock disbelief.
Across from the dinner table, his sister glared at him, probably due to his over-acting. But his mother didn’t seem to notice.
‘That’s right’ she gleamed merrily. ‘We’ve found a lovely man who is willing to take you. Won’t that be wonderful!’
‘Aha’ Ashton laughed uncomfortably, trying to sound nonchalant. ‘That would be um…. *interesting*.’
His mother frowned at him slightly, raising an eyebrow.
‘Ashton’ his mother spoke in a stern and disapproving voice. ‘You know how important this is don’t you?’
‘Yes’ Ashton fumbled quickly. ‘Of…of course I do.’
‘And you’re excited about it aren’t you?’ his mother prompted.
‘Yes’ Ashton answered hesitantly. ‘I am super-excited! Ha ha… haaa…...’ he fell into an unconvincing silence.
‘And anyway’ his mother continued enthusiastically, turning towards her husband, ‘attending another wedding would be in all of our interests! It is always a wonderful thing to have our family gathered together! Its just a shame that we all live so far apart. Oh, it would be so wonderful to see all our nieces and nephews again.’ His mother shrieked suddenly, which did

not alarm anyone. ‘Alicia! You could bring your children! Ashton has not met them yet and…oh it would be so wonderful to see them!’
‘They are too young to travel’ Alicia said to her mother with a frown, the same frown that Maya had given Ashton not moments before.
Mother and daughter were the same in so many ways, and Ashton had wondered if Alicia would one day become as excited and frantic as their mother. One day it may happen, but not yet. It had not happened yet.
Ashton bowed his head as he continued to cut his food, wondering briefly then what his sisters’ children would grow to be like. Would they be more like their mother, or grandmother?
‘Why can’t you bring the children?’ Maya protested in despair, as beside her Isaac continued to drink heavily from the wine bottle.
‘It would be too stressful for them’ Alicia answered stubbornly back. ‘And besides’ she said with a grin, reaching forwards to grasp another bottle of wine, pouring more into her glass. ‘Its nice to get away from them every once in a while.’
‘Now now’ Isaac spoke up at last, putting down the now empty bottle and turning his hawk-eyes onto Ashton. ‘Let’s not forget the important matter.’
‘Oh yes! The wedding’ Maya cried out then in shock. ‘Ashton’ she glowered. ‘Were you trying to distract me? Well it won’t work!’
‘What?’
‘Shame on you’ Maya wagged a finger at him.
Ashton paused for a moment, fork lifted into the air. ‘I…didn’t do anything’ he spoke weakly.
‘We need to talk about the wedding’ Isaac spoke sternly to him.
‘What’s to talk about?’ Ashton asked. ‘I thought you both were arranging it. You…are arranging it all, right?’
‘Of course we are’ Maya and Isaac both spoke simultaneously, giving a look to Ashton as if he had just told them that the sky was blue…. or that he was gay.
‘We are actually really good at weddings. And oh, what excitement it will be!’ Maya clapped her hands with a giggle. ‘I just cannot *wait!*’
‘So, um…’ Ashton began reluctantly, not wanting to hear the answer but resigning himself. ‘When uh…when is the wedding?’
‘At the end of the month’ his mother said slyly, leaning forwards on the table with her arms cross.
‘What?’
‘What?’ she echoed Ashton innocently.
‘At the end of this month?’ Ashton spoke weakly. ‘But… that’s so soon…’
‘It makes it all the more fun’ Isaac wagged his finger at his son.
‘What? But…’ Ashton trailed off hopelessly.
‘Oh, come on Ashton’ his mother gleamed at him, putting her hands splayed on the table and rising, ‘it’s so much more entertaining this way, don’t you think? There’s no point in dwelling on it’ she continued, turning and walking away, Isaac leaping out of his seat and hurrying after her, walking by her side. ‘As soon as we found him, we decided on the earliest possible date. That should be enough time for the guests to arrive at least, we are inviting as many as we can. *All* the family will come!’
‘Wait where are you going?’ Ashton called out after his parents.
‘We’re going to the roof’ Isaac replied in his bellowing voice.
‘The roof? But why?’

‘We’re making a little den there’ his mother waved at him playfully. ‘But *you’re* not allowed to go there, this is just meant for me and your father.’ She grasped his arm tightly then. ‘We’re going to have tea and cakes and sleep under the stars…’ she swooned, eyes deep and distant.
‘My love’ Isaac soothed then, cupping her face. ‘I cannot wait for night to fall’ he said, as both Ashton and Alicia turned away wordlessly, used to their antics. ‘We should bring a telescope and search for star constellations…we should do it by candlelight.’
‘Or moonlight’ Maya breathed, holding his in turn, leaning into him. ‘If there are no clouds.’
‘Oh gosh!’ Isaac said. ‘What if there are too many clouds?!’
‘It’s ok my love’ Maya went on, as their children ignored them, ‘we can do origami.’
‘By candlelight?’ Isaac asked.
‘By candlelight’ Maya repeated, her eyes warm and full of love and adoration.
Isaac lifted Maya up then, sitting her atop his shoulder as she squealed in delight.
He marched off briskly, carrying her with him.
The door slammed shut, and after a few moments, silence ensued. A few of the servants who had been waiting at the edges of the large room stepped forwards then to begin clearing the table.
Ashton glanced up, ignoring the servants who milled quietly around as he opened his mouth to speak to Alicia.
‘His name was Edmund wasn’t it?’
‘Yes’ Alicia spoke quietly, ‘he’s only a little older than you.’
‘When…when is he coming? It will be a few days before the wedding won’t it?’
‘I don’t know.’

That evening, Ashton went to bed early, lying on his side on top of the sheets, still fully dressed. His room was large, very large, mostly empty space, same as the rest of the manor. At the edges of the room were many cabinets and mirrors, and either side of his large bed, were great square windows, reaching almost from ceiling to floor.
In the daytime they would show such a beautiful view of the garden, filling the room with natural light. But now, all that could be seen were the pretty lights, from the hushed city around them, and the stars that twinkled overhead.
Ashton heard one of the double doors to the bedroom open, and he opened his eyes, looking tiredly across the room without raising his head.
The light in the room was dimmed, but he could see his sister standing there on the threshold, her eyes large and beautiful.
She smiled, stepping into the room, closing the door gently behind her.
She lay on the bed beside him, facing him with a smile upon her face, her eyes shining brightly.
‘Hey sis’ Ashton mumbled.
She let out a sigh, reaching towards him and taking his hand in her own.
‘What are you thinking?’ she asked him softly, never taking her eyes off him as she continued to hold his hand.
‘I don’t know’ Ashton sighed unhappily.
‘Tell me’ Alicia prompted.
‘I just’ Ashton began reluctantly, ‘I just wonder how much my life will change after this, and if I will ever be happy.’

‘I wish there was something I could do’ Alicia mumbled.
‘Its fine’ Ashton said a little more encouragingly now. ‘I just um….. I think I will be ok. I have mum and dad still…and even if they don’t always listen or take me seriously, I still have you. I know you will always listen to me. And not just that, but you understand.’
‘Well’ Alicia said with a smile, ‘I try to at least. I know they both can be so frustrating at times.’
They fell into silence for a moment, simply lying on the bed facing each other, Alicia still holding Ashton’s hand.
They then heard a faint noise, the sound of roaring laughter and hysterical giggling.
It was their parents on the roof, doing who knows what.
‘It does make me happy to see them so happy’ Ashton smiled.
‘Yeah’ Alicia grinned back.
‘I wish I could be as happy as them in marriage, as happy as you’ he said to her.
‘My husband has always been good to me’ Alicia said, her love shown clearly in her eyes.
‘I hope Edmund is a good man…’ Ashton spoke, trailing off. ‘I hope…’

Chapter Four

The next morning Ashton was gently woken by the sound of birdsong, as the sparrows sang to one another, flitting outside the window. They often perched on the windowsill outside, pecking at the corners to steal the insects that had been caught in the spider’s webs.
Ashton opened his eyes, seeing his sister sleeping beside him, still facing him as she had the night before when she had first laid down. Her hand still in his.
He smiled at that; having forgotten for a moment that she was by his side.
Ashton let out a deep and calming sigh, closing his eyes again, listening to the birdcalls outside his window.
He was just drifting off to sleep once more, when the door to his bedroom was thrown open, bouncing back off the wall loudly.
Alicia jolted awake, eyes wide and staring at the door in alarm.
‘*SURPRIIIIIIIIIISE!’*
It was their mother. Maya was dressed in very bright and beautiful colours, blue, yellow and orange. She wore an Indian style dress, the yellow shawl she wore slung over a shoulder and resting in the crook of her arm. Her hair was beautifully made up, and a delicate chain of bright jewels ran across her forehead.
She glided into the room, holding a wicker basket in her hand that was filled with confetti piled high, coloured orange white and green. She began to toss it into the air as she went, moving swiftly over to the bed Ashton and Alicia rested upon, filling the air with confetti that rained gently down upon them.
Isaac followed after his wife, singing merrily in his booming voice. He was dressed in a very well-fitting (custom-made) Indian dress, and wore a bright red turban upon his head, and was waving around silken strips of red cloth. Dancing and twirling after his wife.

‘What a wonderful day for a celebration!’ Isaac roared joyfully.
Alicia ignored both of them, grabbing the pillow from the bed and holding it over her head, groaning loudly in exasperation.
Ashton sat up, sighing and rubbing his eyes, he ran his hands down his face tiredly.
‘What are you doing?’ he grumbled to his parents wearily.
‘It’s a celebration!’ Maya called out loudly. ‘We should rejoice!’
‘What are we celebrating?’ Ashton asked his mother monotone.
‘It’s Tuesday!’ Maya and Isaac sang in unison, grasping each other’s hands and leaning into one another.
‘Isn’t that great?!’ Isaac hollered.
As Maya continued to hold the wicker basket, laughing and giggling joyfully, Isaac grabbed whole handfuls of the confetti she carried, throwing it up in the air over the bed.
Ashton watched them passively now, chin resting on his palm, eyes half-closed, still feeling tired.
Beside him Alicia tried her best to ignore both of them, still with the pillow over her head.
‘Why are you dressed in Indian clothes?’ Ashton asked them.
‘We are celebrating their culture’ Maya giggled back.
‘And the fact its Tuesday’ Isaac chipped in.
‘Oh yes!’ Maya exclaimed then. ‘It’s Tuesday! Isn’t that wonderful?!’
Ashton nudged Alicia beside him, asking her if she wanted breakfast.
‘Oh yes please’ she spoke enthusiastically now, taking the pillow away from her face. ‘And fast!’
They hurried out the room together, leaving Isaac and Maya behind in the bedroom, the two began singing and dancing about the room, jumping on the bed and being incredibly loud.
‘Oh’ Ashton sighed then as they reached the kitchen and were at last found in blissful silence. ‘The maids will have fun cleaning up all that confetti.’
Alicia sighed in agreement, though said nothing.
‘Honestly’ Ashton shook his head slowly, glancing behind him in the direction they had come. ‘What are they like? I just don’t know where they get their energy from.’

They sat at the breakfast table, and the servants quickly brought them food.
‘I’m starving’ Ashton said, eating fast.
‘Slow down, you’ll give yourself indigestion’ Alicia scolded.
Ashton paused, picking up a napkin and dabbing at his mouth.
‘Sorry.’
Alicia shook her head at him tiredly.
‘The stress I think has made me hungry’ Ashton spoke absentmindedly. ‘First I want nothing to eat, next thing I’m starving.’
‘Well I don’t blame you’ Alicia said to him, reaching for her glass and taking a sip of orange juice. ‘I remember how nervous I was when…. you know.’ She took another sip. ‘It is a little daunting, I won’t lie.’
‘But what’s the point of me marrying if I cannot have children?’ Ashton asked his sister then. ‘I mean…. isn’t that the point?’
‘Because its expected of you I guess’ Alicia shrugged. ‘Can’t break tradition, even if you do like men.’
She finished the rest of her juice, putting the glass down carefully and taking a napkin.

‘We should go out together somewhere today’ Alicia said then, ‘get away from home for a few hours.’
‘Where?’
‘How about the beach?’ Alicia suggested. ‘I know you love the cliffs there; you always say how beautiful they are.’
‘Yeah’ Ashton smiled, turning to glance through the window. ‘They are always beautiful, even on dark days’ he said looking to the blue sky. ‘Today they will be especially gorgeous.’
Ashton always like the cliffs at the beach. The stone was the most beautiful copper colour, and would sparkle in the sunlight, much likes the surface of the ocean. He loved the climb these cliffs, after getting bored of collecting seashells which he would gather on the rocks. He would climb the cliffs and watch the vast ocean once he reached the top, sitting on the edge with his sister as he had done so many times before. He would often sit and just stare out at the horizon before him, in awe and wonder at how truly big the world was in which he lived.
‘I think we should go’ Ashton said, ‘I would love to go. I just want to get away from home for a short time to clear my head. I…. need time to think.’
‘Yeah’ Alicia nodded enthusiastically. ‘Me too.’

A short time later, right after breakfast, Ashton and Alicia were walking together side by side through the manor, leaving the breakfast hall behind them.
‘We should tell our parents that we’re going out’ Alicia spoke up.
‘Awww?’
‘Oh, come on Ashton’ Alicia frowned at him disapprovingly.
‘I really don’t want to.’
‘I know.’
‘They’ll probably try to stop us.’
‘You think so?’ Alicia replied.
Ashton grimaced slightly, half-turning away.
‘They still don’t know I sneak out to practice dancing’ he mumbled. ‘I wish I could tell them... but….’ He bit his lip, brow furrowed. ‘I am afraid.’
They slowed then, coming to a stop in one of the hallways.
Alicia turned to him.
‘What are you afraid of?’ she asked him softly.
‘I’m…’ Ashton began reluctantly, his voice weak and feeble. ‘I’m…afraid of…’
He glanced away; shoulders slumped. But he said no more, lips together now.
Alicia sighed wearily at him, feeling suddenly hopeless.
‘Come on’ she said, linking her arm with his. ‘Let’s go find them.’
They walked away again, arm in arm, and went to find their parents, drifting through the manor lazily. They found them a short while later. Isaac and Maya had fallen asleep upon the sofa in one of the other rooms, the games room. This was one of Ashton’s favourite rooms in the manor. It was a large room, warm and inviting, the walls were lined with wooden panels, and there was a lot of rich emerald-green within the room. There was a pool table on one side, an air-hockey table, a poker table, a hearth that was now absent of flames, and a small bar in the corner of the room.
Isaac and Maya now were draped over the lush emerald sofas, both fast asleep. Maya slept on her side curled up in a ball, and Isaac lay back, sleeping with his mouth open, arms splayed and leg hanging off the back of the sofa.

Alicia could not help but stifle a small chuckle behind her hand as she saw them.
‘Oh, that’s so cute’ she whispered, straightening up again and lowering her hand. ‘I would feel terrible to wake them.’
Ashton walked around the sofa to see them better.
He smiled silently to himself, he loved his parents very much, it made him so happy to see them happy.
‘They probably won’t even notice us gone anyway’ Ashton said, glancing back up towards his sister. ‘Let’s just go, and leave them in peace.’
‘If you say so, let’s not be too long in that case. I wouldn’t want to worry them.’
Ashton and Alicia left the manor quietly, telling no one where they were going and avoiding all others, the maids that wandered the house going about their businesses, and the gardeners outside tending to the plants. Everyday they were here, but as the siblings moved swiftly, and they managed to avoid all wandering eyes.
Ashton walked ahead now down the steep steps, the path they followed dipped sharply, leading to a tall and slender iron gate. There were several about the property at the edges, different places to come in and out, but Ashton’s favourite was this one, because it was the most secret. Beyond this gate was nothing but a small and completely empty courtyard, leading to a slim alleyway between two buildings, a laundrette and a pharmacist. The slim alleyway led out onto the sidewalk. The end of the alleyway was dark and drab, causing it to be easily overlooked. No one came this way, most hardly even noticed it.
Ashton took a deep breath to gather himself, glancing up and down the road, seeing the steady flow of cars toing and froing. The city around their home was always busy, the streets filled with people. Their tranquil home surrounded by beautiful and spacious gardens was like a little paradise, hidden within the city, tucked away within the organised chaos.
Alicia took Ashton’s hand excitedly, pulling him down one way, heading the most direct path towards the edge of the city.
‘I’ve not been here for so long’ she breathed, not slowing her pace, ‘it feels to strange to be back, but I love it!’
Ashton couldn’t help but smile as he ran after her, his hand still in hers. He picked up his pace, grasping her hand tighter now and jogging to keep up with her, now they were side by side.
They ignored all else that was around them, within their own little world, nothing existed to them but each other, and their destination.
In no time at all, they had left the bustle behind them, and for the first time in a long time, Ashton was able to step off the concrete and onto the sand, feeling the familiar and wonderful texture beneath him.
He grinned wider now as Alicia let go of his hand, dropping to her knees and pushing her splayed fingers into the sand.
‘Its warm’ Alicia beamed, looking ever so beautiful in the sunlight. ‘I love days like these, these are the best.’
‘I wish you didn’t have to go back’ Ashton spoke suddenly without thinking. ‘I… I miss you when you go. And saying goodbye never gets easier.’
‘I know’ Alicia replied, rising to her feet and brushing the sand from her knees and the skirt of her pretty white dress. ‘It’s the same for me too.’
She ran her fingers through her pale-blonde hair, gazing out towards the ocean, towards the cliffs.
‘Come on’ she said without turning back, ‘let’s go see if we can find that den we made again.’

‘That’s long gone’ Ashton scoffed.
‘It *might* still be there’ Alicia replied indignantly, beginning to pout a little.
‘The sea would have washed that away ages ago’ Ashton waved at her.
‘Let’s go find out’ Alicia said, making her way carefully forwards, walking at a gentle pace. ‘And remember’ she said glancing back at him, ‘no running. We don’t want you cutting yourself on sharp rocks again.’
‘Are you ever going to let that go?’ Ashton sighed, walking slowly after her. ‘That was so long ago.’
Alicia said nothing to this, merely giggled and winked at him cheekily in reply.
They drifted towards the ocean, Ashton walking a step behind his sister.
The den they saw when they had found the location had been washed away, much to the disappointment of Alicia. And so, they turned away, heading towards the cliffs instead.
They walked side by side at the base, staring up towards the top.
‘It’s a beautiful view from up there’ Alicia spoke in a distant voice. ‘Wouldn’t you like to see it?’
‘I would’ Ashton replied.
‘It’s been too long’ Alicia said, slowing to a stop and turning fully to face the steep cliffs now, the skirt of her dress swishing around her ankles. ‘There’s so much I miss from home.’
And without another word she stepped forwards, heading towards the rocky slopes.
‘Hey hold on’ Ashton called after her, hurrying to keep up.
Alicia tied the skirt of her dress in a knot to keep it out of the way, tucking her hair behind her ear. She made a move forwards, beginning to climb.
Ashton had seen her do this many times before, but not for such a long time, and he watched her now with trepidation. But as he saw her climbing higher up the slope of the rocky cliff, he saw her move with surety, and his heart eased in his chest just a little.
He waited for a moment longer, simply watching from the bottom, until he saw Alicia reach the very top, climbing over the edge of the cliff and back onto safe and solid ground. She turned back to him.
‘You’ve still not moved from that spot?’ she exclaimed; her voice muffled by the sound of the wind. ‘Hurry up lazy bones. What are you even waiting for? You’ve done this so many times…’
Ashton gave a little frown of annoyance at that, stepping forwards towards the rock.
He lifted his foot to the nearest ledge, grabbing a suitable hold. He began to climb.
From above his sister watched patiently, not saying a word, simply waiting for him to reach her. But as Ashton climbed, his mind became foggy, and his thoughts distracted.
Edmund….
He wondered what kind of a man he was, why his parents had chosen him, whether or not he was a kind and loving man.
Ashton pursed his lips then, feeling a sudden wave of sadness and despair of the situation washing over him.
He did not even know what Edmund looked like; had not so much been shown a picture.
‘Ashton!’
His sister’s voice snapped him sharply out of his lacklustre thoughts.
His foot slipped, hand shooting out to grab something to hold onto, but his fingers just slipped off the rock.
The last thing that Ashton experienced before blacking out, was shock, and a sudden and sharp pain on the back of his head.

Chapter Five

Ashton dreamed strange dreams.
He dreamed that he was standing upon a path of pure starlight, beautiful ribbons of colour stood out to him against a dark backdrop, little distant lights twinkling at him, though he wasn't sure what they were, perhaps they were streetlights.
He remembered stepping forwards, his movements slow as if he were moving through treacle, his arms extended either side of him as he moved gracefully.
He took another step forward, his face feeling heavy, he recognised the sensation. Even in his dream, he was wearing a lot of makeup, and as he twisted his body around, arching his back, he glanced down at himself, seeing his clothes were brightly coloured and seductive, showing a brave amount of skin.
He turned around again, feeling the wind of the world blowing around him, buffeting his hair and clothes this way and that. He extended his arm forwards then, fingers splayed.
He closed his hand around the pole, feeling the cool sensation of the metal upon his skin.
He opened his eyes.
Ashton lay on his back. For a few moments he did not move, simply laying there and staring up at the ceiling.
He shifted slightly, realising his was in a bed, his own bed, back in his bedroom, and then he felt the aches all over his body, remembering suddenly what had happened.
I fell. I was thinking about him…and I fell.
He grimaced then, lifting his head off the pillow.
He heard movement by his side, a voice speaking softly his name.
'Ashton.'
He looked around, seeing his sister's concerned face. She was leaning forwards in her chair now, one hand reaching forwards towards the bed, she grasped his arm lightly.
'How do you feel?'
Ashton blinked at her wearily, trying to gather his thoughts, not speaking at first, he glanced past his sister, and towards the figures of his parents.
All three of them had brought chairs up alongside his bed, and had sat there for however long it had taken for him to wake up. Isaac looked back at him with concern, Maya on the other hand was glaring, lips pursed and body tense.
She was not happy.
'I'm so glad you're awake' Alicia was saying as Ashton gingerly propped himself up, moving tentatively as he took mental note of where the pains were in his body and how much they hurt. He didn't want to move too much or too fast.
'I'm not happy with you' his mother spoke up then, her tone harsh, no longer her cheery self. 'Not happy. At all.'
Ashton raised his head looking over at her.
She sat with her back straight, hands upon her lap, and very, very tense, and very, very angry.

Though she contained her full rage, Ashton could see clearly how mad she was. It was very rare that she would be like this. Only one time before when Ashton had really messed up, back when he was much younger, had he seen her like this.
'There there' Isaac said then, trying to calm his wife. 'It was just an accident' he laughed awkwardly. 'No need to get mad.'
But Maya appeared to completely ignore him, continuing to glare at Ashton unblinkingly.
'Mother just stop' Alicia spoke irritant back at her without turning away from Ashton. 'Just leave him be.'
Maya did not turn away.
'It was just an accident' Alicia went on, 'he's never fallen before, this is the first…'
'So how often do you do dangerous things like this?' Maya asked the both of them, but she was still looking at Ashton.
He simply hunched his shoulders, avoiding her gaze.
'Why *did* you fall' Alicia asked him, her voice tender. 'You seemed distracted, was something on your mind?'
Ashton didn't speak, but his eyes widened a little then as he stared back at his sister, his expression almost pleading.
'That's it!' Isaac spoke in his booming voice, beating his fist into his open palm, suddenly very animated. 'It's because he's excited at the idea of getting married! That must be it! Is your sister right?' he said to Ashton then. 'Were you distracted? Where you thinking of your fiancé?'
'Well…' Ashton began reluctantly. 'I guess I was…a little…'
'Excellent!' his father boomed, holding his arms out open as if in celebration. 'This is most excellent news! You are excited I can tell! You are already beginning to fall in love!'
Ashton just stared mutely back at his father, unable to speak.
Beside Isaac, Maya still sat frozen, back straight and body tense. She still continued to stare at Ashton.
He began to feel very uncomfortable under her piercing gaze.
'I um…' Ashton fumbled, trying to find his words. 'I think I'm going to rest now.'
'I think that's his way of saying he wants to be alone' Alicia spoke firmly to their parents.
'Come on now darling' Isaac said to Maya then, hooking his arm through hers. 'Let's go see what colour the flowers we planted turned out to be.'
Alicia lingered for a moment, hanging back to make sure they both went ahead of her before following after them.
She paused at the door, smiling back at Ashton.
'Sorry' she said to him then, 'she's just worried' she said, referring to their mother. 'You know how she gets.'
'Yeah' Ashton laughed awkwardly. 'It's not often she's that mad though. I guess I really messed up this time hu?'
She smiled to him.
'I'll leave you to rest. If you need me just call ok?'
Ashton glanced around towards the bedside table, seeing his mobile placed upon there. She had brought it for him.
'Thanks' he muttered gratefully.
'Is there anything else I can get you?' she offered.
'Nah thanks' he smiled. 'I'm good.'
'I hope you feel alright.'

‘I’ll be fine’ Ashton spoke confidently to her. ‘It doesn’t hurt that much.’
‘The doctor is on his way here to check you out.’
‘Oh no that’s not really necessary’ Ashton fumbled then, feeling suddenly a little embarrassed at the idea of a doctor examining him.
‘No really’ Alicia sighed exasperated then, ‘mother has insisted. You know she won’t take no for an answer.’
Ashton slumped his shoulders, supressing a groan.
‘Fine’ he grumbled.
‘Just go along with it to keep her happy’ Alicia smiled.
‘Sure.’
‘I’ll let you rest’ she said, dipping her head then and turning away.
Ashton glanced back up at her just as she was closing the door.
He was left alone now, looking back briefly at his mobile on the table beside him, before his gaze drifted out towards the window.
It was a beautiful day outside, and the sunlight cascading in the room warmed the air up to a comfortable degree.
Ashton eased himself carefully back down into the bed, shifting gingerly as he moved to lie on his side, resting with his arm folded beneath the pillow.
The sunlight shone through the windows upon the bed, warming the thin sheets, and Ashton was comfortable.
He let out a sigh, closing his eyes.
He began to drift off to sleep.

Chapter Six

Ashton felt a touch to his face; something tickled his cheek.
He frowned then in his sleep, bringing a hand to his cheek to brush away whatever was bothering him.
And then he heard a faint chuckle.
Ashton opened his eyes.
He looked around, seeing a figure sitting upon the edge of his bed, a male figure. He didn’t know this man.
‘Hello’ the stranger said, a great smile upon his face.
Ashton let out a slight gasp, sitting up sharply in bed and flinching at the pain.
‘Ah!’
‘Are you alright?’ the stranger said.
‘Who are you?’
‘My name is Edmund. My full name is Edmund Rodrigo Quartz.’
Ashton was speechless, his throat dry as the wheels in his head began to turn slowly.

The guy just stared back at Ashton with a smile, not saying anything, but simply grinning with perfect white teeth.
Ashton realised then that he was waiting for him to speak.
Closing his mouth and swallowing.
'Um' Ashton began. 'Edmund?'
'Yes' Edmund beamed widely. 'I'm your fiancé.'
Ashton's eyes widened then, and he felt a strange sensation pass through him. He felt a tingle of nerves in the pit of his stomach, and he swallowed the lump in his throat, balling his fists.
'Oh' he croaked, barely able to speak.
'It's good to finally meet you at last' Edmund said.
'Hu?'
'Your name is Ashton Lucius Miles isn't it?' he gleamed.
Ashton looked closely at Edmund now, for the first time fully taking in his features.
Edmund was nineteen, Ashton was seventeen. Edmund was a tall and lean figure, extremely handsome with hair dyed a deep dark blue colour and flicked outwards, a strand running across his forehead. He winked at Ashton cheekily as he noticed Ashton's prolonged attention.
Ashton blushed slightly at this, turning away sharply, eyes wide like a deer in headlights.
'I'm so excited' he said to Ashton.
'Hu?' Ashton said again.
Edmund only chuckled, reaching forwards and touching Ashton's cheek tenderly.
Ashton flinched at his touch; eyes widening further.
'What's wrong?' Edmund chuckled again, noticing this. 'Do I frighten you?'
'W-what are you doing here?' Ashton fumbled, clutching his bedsheets tighter to him now, shoulders hunched and body tense.
'I came here to see you' Edmund replied without a pause. 'I am so excited to be married to you.'
Ashton pursed his lips, jaw clenched and heart hammering in his chest.
He could only stare mutely back at Edmund, completely lost for words.

It was only a short time later when the doctor arrived, and Ashton was surprised to see that she was in fact female, not male as he initially expected.
'I thought it would be better for you to be examined by a nice young lady rather than a big strong hunk' his mother beamed at him, having regained her usual playful and childish composure.
'Um' Ashton replied awkwardly, as the female doctor stood behind Maya looking a little flabbergasted at this. 'I'm not sure…. that's how um…. they're just here to do their job.'
'Yeah but I don't want you falling in love with anyone else' Maya said, poking him teasingly on the end of the nose. 'I don't want you to fall in love with any other man' she glistened at him. 'You're getting married remember? To a man' she added. 'Because you're gay.'
It seems like she deliberately said these last things to make a point, at this moment, Ashton was just trying to block her out, face in his hands and cheeks red as she flushed silently.
'Come now my love!' Isaac spoke heartily and with great enthusiasm. 'We have to put that face-paint on. That make-up isn't going to apply itself!'

Maya shrieked in delight then, balling her fists over her chest excitedly and bouncing up and down.
'EEEEEMMMAAAAAHHHHHGAAAAWWWWEEEDDD!' she exclaimed. 'Hurry! First one to the changing room gets to wear the dress!'
And without another word, without acknowledging anyone from that point on, Maya and Isaac both rushed out of the room, darting as fast as they could. Their footfalls could be heard quickly receding down the hall, and then, blissful silence.
Ashton finally glanced between his fingers, hands still over his face.
From his bed he could see the open doorway. His sister had appeared in view then, staring down the hallway in the direction their parents had gone.
She turned back to face Ashton with an apologetic shrug.
'Honestly' she sighed. 'I don't know where they get their energy from.'
The female doctor still stood in the middle of the room, watching Alicia now, still looking a little confused.
'I'm sorry' Ashton mumbled uncomfortably to the doctor. 'They're always like that. And my mother is um…yeah.'
'It's ok' the female doctor said to him. 'Now if you are ready for me to examine you?'
Ashton flushed awkwardly at that all of a sudden, going even redder than before.
'I was told that you fell while climbing?' the doctor continued, paying no notice to his reaction.
'Ah. Yes, I was um…you know I go climbing sometimes and uh…I was just a little distracted this time I guess.'
'You mean with getting married?'
'Hu?' Ashton fumbled.
'It's ok, I'm only teasing' the doctor grinned at him. 'Sorry, I probably shouldn't. I should be more professional.'
'No no its ok!' Ashton spoke hastily, becoming a little flustered. 'I don't mind.'
Alicia who had been watching from the doorway silently, slowly reached for the door handle.
'I'll leave you to it' she said to them both, before speaking directly to the doctor. 'We'll be in the kitchen when you finish, and thanks again for coming.'
'No problem' the doctor nodded.
Alicia closed the door. It was now Ashton alone in the room with the female doctor.
He smiled nervously up at her.
'Now can you tell me where it hurts?' the doctor began, placing her bag on the small table beside the bed. 'I'll give you a general check while I'm here also, just check your heart and all the usual things as standard.'
'Ok. And it kinda hurts…' Ashton shifted a little, 'everywhere' he laughed sheepishly.
After removing most of his clothes, he was found to have bruises and cuts across various places on his body, as well as a small bump on his head, which was not so noticeable beneath his hair.
'You're perfectly healthy' the doctor concluded a short time later, beginning to pack away her things. 'Nothing is out of place and nothing is broken.'
'That's a relief' Ashton sighed, putting his shirt back on.
'Everything else is excellent and you are perfectly fit. Do you work out at all?'
Ashton swallowed a little nervously then, thinking suddenly about his dancing. An obscure hobby, especially for someone like him. Not many would understand, and he wished he had the courage to tell people that he could probably crush their skulls between his thighs.
'I don't think I've seen anyone with such a wonderful build.'

‘Well’ Ashton went on, ‘maybe I do work out…a little.’
‘Just stay away from the cliffs ok?’ the doctor smiled at him, taking up her bag.
‘I will’ Ashton nodded. ‘And thank you.’
The doctor gave him a short and respective bow, before turning and walked towards the door, no doubt heading to the kitchen to speak with his sister, and his parents, whatever state they were in.
Ashton let out a heavy sigh, leaning back in bed, thankful it was all over.
And then his heart suddenly tightened in his chest as he remembered something.
Opening his eyes again he looked across the room, mouth dry and break caught in his throat.
A figure made himself known then, coming out from hiding as he stepped out from behind the dressing room divider, set across from him in the vast room.
Edmund turned his head towards Ashton, a mischievous smile playing about his lips.

Chapter Seven

‘Are you sure you’re ready to go out? I think it’s a little too soon’ his sister berated him a time later.
‘Alicia’ Ashton sighed patiently. ‘I’m feeling better now. And besides…I just want some time by myself. I um…. need to think about things…. I need to clear my head.’
‘You’re still worried about getting married’ Alicia replied in a monotone. But it was not phrased as a question.
‘Well…. not worried exactly’ Ashton laughed awkwardly, avoiding eye contact with her then.
‘The thing is…. You know….. mum and dad would be so happy when I’m finally married…’
‘Especially dear mother’ Alicia added with a sigh, leaning on a hip and folding her arms. ‘Oh Ashton…remember you can tell me anything. If you don’t want them to know about it, you know I will keep it a secret.’
‘I know’ Ashton smiled. ‘I know.’
She straightened up then, unfolding her arms.
‘Just take care of yourself ok?’ his sister said to him.
‘I will’ he nodded in reply.
‘Will you be going to the dance studio?
‘N-no’ Ashton fumbled, ‘I’m not sure. Maybe.’
Alicia gave a slight frown at this, her eyes narrowing ever so slightly, though she said nothing of whatever she was thinking at that time.
‘Anyway’ she cocked her head. ‘I’ll see you later then. Take care. You’re just going to walk around the city?’
‘Yeah. I just need to be alone for a bit. And I think some fresh air would be really good for me.’
Alicia smiled then, taking a step towards him and holding his face tenderly in her hands.
Ashton closed his eyes, dipping his chin as Alicia went to kiss him on the forehead.
‘Take care’ she said to him, her voice soft and delicate and full of love. ‘Come to my room if you want me. And never forget that you can tell me anything. Ok?’
‘Yeah’ Ashton said, his eyes shining brightly. ‘I know……thank you.’

She turned and walked away from him then, leaving him alone on the steps.
Ashton watched her go, waiting until she was out of sight, before turning away.
He continued the rest of the way down the stairs, walking slowly. He was very aware of himself at that moment, and all the little pains in his body, the bruises and cuts. Ashton grimaced, cursing himself.
'How could I have been so distracted' he uttered under his breath. 'I just slipped. It was a stupid mistake, and now I have everyone worried for me.'
He shook his head, still a little amazed at his own carelessness.
He reached the bottom of the stairs, continuing his way down the hall as he headed towards one of the doors that led outside.
It was at this moment a thought slowly seeped into his mind, and it was one that he did not like.
I won't be able to dance well in this state….
The edges of his eyes crinkled then, and he felt a tightness in his throat, before swallowing the lump that had formed there and taking a deep and steady breath.
He reached the door, opening it carefully and slipping through, closing it quietly behind him.
Clenching his teeth as he looked across the beautiful gardens, the city was clearly visible at a distance, a busy and congested place. His home however, despite being so close to the rest of this hectic world, was a peaceful and removed sanctuary.

Ashton took his first few steps forwards, away from the manor, his feet thudding gently on the grass as he jogged across the garden.
He wanted to be alone, and feared for a brief moment that a figure might see him passing by, perhaps one of the gardeners, or someone from within the manor glancing through one of the windows at that time.
Reaching one of the winding paths at last, Ashton was hidden from view by the tall hedges either side of him.
As he continued forwards, he was completely oblivious that he was not only being watched, but being followed.
The ascending steps were steep, and Ashton moved carefully as he went, feeling dull aches across his body.
He had just reached the gate, pausing then to open it, before suddenly hearing a faint sound behind him.
Ashton wheeled around, wincing suddenly at the sharp pain in his side.
'Ow' he gasped, hand going to his side then, shoulders hunched.
'I'm sorry' the figure grinned widely and confidently back at him, eyes teasing. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'
Ashton relaxed a little as the pain subsided, letting out a slow breath before lifting his head, gazing back at the man that stood before him.
'Edmund? W-what are you doing here?'
Edmund put his arms behind his back, holding his hands behind him as he leant forwards towards Ashton, grinning widely, showing his perfect teeth. He tilted his head to the side, considering Ashton then with a playful expression, before straightening up again and letting his arms fall to his side.
'I wanted to see where you were going' Edmund said. 'Why are you leaving?'
'Me?'
'Well who else could I be talking to?' Edmund replied in a sudden condescending tone.

Edmund turned around, facing the small tree beside him.
‘Hello tree. How are you today?’
Ashton blinked in confusion at this, not knowing what to make of it.
‘Are you making fun of me?’ he asked.
‘I wouldn’t dream of it!’ Edmund replied hastily in a sing-song voice. ‘So’ he said, twitching his head towards Ashton. ‘Where are we going?’
‘What?’
‘I’m your fiancé’ Edmund said teasingly, closing the gap between them in a heartbeat and putting his arm around Ashton. ‘We should spend what time we can together. I want to get to know you.’
He spoke this last part in a seductive purr.
‘Ah’ Ashton said. ‘Oh.’
‘Are you shy?’ Edmund asked him then, still leaning into him with his arm around his shoulders.
‘I um…guess you could say that’ Ashton replied, giving Edmund an uncertain smile that only flickered on his lips briefly before vanishing.
‘I’ll go easy on you then’ he said, at last straightening up and removing his arm from around Ashton.
Ashton tried to supress a sigh of relief, his heart hammering painfully in his chest.
He tried to stand a little taller, tried to make himself appear a little more relaxed, a little more comfortable.
‘You look nervous’ Edmund said.
He failed.
‘Oh...d-do I?’
‘Do you always stutter?’ Edmund asked, raising an eyebrow.
Ashton began to feel suddenly very uncomfortable and self-conscious, pursing his lips as his cheeks flushed red.
‘Oh you really are’ Edmund went on, putting his hands on his hips and turning fully towards him now, facing him head on. ‘I didn’t know. I don’t mean to tease.’
‘Oh….ok.’
Edmund frowned at him, tilting his head towards Ashton.
‘I want to get to know you’ he said again, this time speaking with sincerity. ‘I want to know the man I am about marry, and I’m sure you want the same. Even though you’re probably too scared to admit it.’
Edmund stared at Ashton who was too nervous to speak, and for a few moments neither said anything.
And then Edmund sighed, dipping his head slightly, relaxing his arms.
‘Alright’ he relented. ‘I really shouldn’t tease you like this; it isn’t fair on you I guess.’
‘Ah…ok.’
Edmund raised his head again, his gaze towards Ashton was seductive, his eyes piercing into him.
‘Show me around your city. I want to see your home.’
‘Sure’ Ashton forced himself to speak, trying to sound in control. ‘Where would you like to go?’
‘Well where were you going before?’

Ashton thought suddenly of the dancing studio, the place he had been planning on going to. It would have been perfect, just want he needed now to clear his mind. He wanted to dance, to feel the music around his body, to truly lose himself. But now…
'I was just….' Ashton thought furiously. 'Nowhere in particular' he decided. 'I guess I was just nervous about you know…getting married.' He finished. 'It's just so unexpected and sudden.'
'Yeah it is' Edmund said stepping back and folding his arms. 'I'm excited though. I can't wait to get to know you.'
Ashton turned away sharply, trying to hide his expression. He was terrified.
'So I guess you don't mind if I follow you around' Edmund continued gleaming at him merrily. 'Just pretend I'm not here.'
'I couldn't possibly do that' Ashton told him.
'Anyway. Talking is boring' Edmund said taking a step back. 'Lead the way. Go on.'
Ashton felt his heart skip a beat, staring back at Edmund.
He turned away then, walking with his shoulders hunched towards the little garden gate. He did not look to Edmund again, afraid to meet his eyes.
Ashton left the grounds of his home, heading out into the streets, all the while he could hear Edmund's footsteps behind him.

Ashton walked through the city, enjoying the atmosphere around him. He had always loved his home in the city, despite the noise, despite the organised chaos. He loved everything just the way it was.
But he could not be at ease, not right now. Walking just behind him and a little to the side was Edmund, hands in his pockets as he went and whistling a merry tune.
Ashton was amazing at how carefree and relaxed Edmund was, when he himself felt terrified and incredibly awkward and out of place.
It had been a pleasant walk, if not a little awkward and uncomfortable with Edmund right behind him, but he had not said a single word since they left the garden of Ashton's home.
When at last he did speak, it caught Ashton by surprise.
'What?' he said, having not heard Edmunds words. His mind had been so far away, thinking only of a metal pole.
'I said let's go down that way' Edmund said.
He had stopped now and was pointing in one direction, towards a narrow street. More like an alley than anything else. It didn't really lead anywhere, it was just a sort of shortcut to another part of the city, another street.
'There's nothing really there' Ashton told him. 'It's just a shortcut.'
'I want to go that way' Edmund insisted, continuing to point. 'Let's go this way.'
Ashton realised then with growing trepidation, that he and Edmund would be alone if they went that way, and he turned to glance the other direction longingly, not wanting to be away from the people walking to and fro in the streets, going about their business.
But he could think of nothing to say, and his voice caught in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry.
He looked back towards the alley, forcing himself to be calm, to breathe easy.
Ashton took a step forwards, heading now towards the alley, with Edmund walking a little behind him and off to one side, as he had been before.

For a time, nothing happened. They were alone together, Ashton and Edmund. They continued to walk in silence.
Then Edmund glanced behind him briefly, before looking forwards again.
He smirked.
Edmund reached for Ashton suddenly without warning, grasping him gently but firmly around the wrist.
Ashton stopped walking, turning back in confusion.
Edmund pulled him back towards him, before moving to position Ashton between himself and the wall of the alley behind him.
He pushed Ashton teasingly back, softly but deliberate.
Ashton let out a gasp as he felt Edmund press his body again him, tilting his head and opening his mouth, eyes closed.
He kissed Ashton then, slipping his tongue into him, moaning lightly, caressing him, his hand moving down his body, the other still holding Ashton by the wrist.
Ashton closed his eyes, body tense he let out a whimper.
Edmund looked at him, breaking away from him and leaning back.
'What's wrong?'
Ashton could only gasp wordlessly, staring back at Edmund with glassy eyes.
Edmund took his hands away from him then, taking a step back.
'Have you um…been with anyone before?'
Ashton shook his head wordlessly, unable to speak.
He was terrified.
'I suppose I should have known' Edmund muttered to himself, frowning and glancing to the side. 'So, you've not had…. any partner at all, girlfriend or boyfriend?'
Ashton shook his head.
'Have you ever…slept with anyone?'
'No' Ashton whispered, at last finding his voice.
'Have you ever kissed or touched anyone in a romantic way?' Edmund asked.
He shook his head.
'I'm sorry you should have said' Edmund replied, speaking sincerely. 'You should have said. I would have known if… I should have known from the way you were acting…sorry.'
Ashton could only stare at him wide eyed, unable to think of anything else to say.
He simply leant back against the wall; hands clutched over his chest.
'I'm sorry' Edmund said to him again, moving closer to him once more. 'I just want…. Just one last time.'
He kissed Ashton again, pressing his body into his, kissing him deeply, owning him, savouring him, until at last he broke away, doing so only reluctantly.
'You are so good' he sighed.
But Ashton did not know what he meant by this.
'I just wanted a taste. Just one last time. For now. But I swear' Edmund said placing a hand over his heart, 'I won't do anything like that again. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable. I want you to love me, as I love you.'
Ashton's heart tightened in his chest upon hearing this, and he stared at Edmund unblinking.
He wanted to speak, he wanted to ask him how he could love him already, after only just meeting him, but Ashton could not find the words.

Chapter Eight

Ashton and Edmund spent only a short time together after that. Edmund made his excuses after a time, and left Ashton to be alone, promising him with a sly wink, that they would meet again soon.
Ashton swallowed the lump in his throat nervously.
Once he was alone, he contemplated heading over to the dancing club to practice. It gave him peace and cleared his mind. Nowhere else did he feel like he did when he was dancing. When he was dancing, he felt truly himself. He felt confident, felt truly alive, like a fire had been lit within his heart. But he was always plagued with worried thoughts at the back of his mind. Only those within the dancing studio whom he practiced with knew, and this was only a handful of people, including his teacher. He considered them all to be true friends, and he trusted them more than anyone else in the world to keep his secret, more than anyone that is, save for his sister. She was the only other person who knew about Ashton's secret passion. The only one outside the dancing studio itself. And he trusted her more than anyone else in his life. He loved his sister dearly. He missed her so much so many days, after she had left home to live a life of her own with her new husband, and then went on to have twins. Ashton was a little envious of her. He should have been married before her, being older, being of purple blood, a lord, it was expected of him. To tie families together and for financial and business gain. Alicia was lucky though, her husband turned out to be a good man who truly cared for her.
Ashton wished he would be so lucky. He did not know what to think of Edmund just yet. It was all too early, and was happening all too soon for him, and all too fast.
He decided in the end not to go to the studio, as he didn't feel it was safe.
He didn't know Edmund yet, and couldn't be sure if he would be followed.
The last thing he wanted was for Edmund of all people to find out. He hadn't a clue how Edmund would react if he found out.
And so instead he pulled out his mobile, sending a text to his dancing teacher, and his closest friend, one of the other students he practiced alongside with, a few years younger than him.
His friend text back almost immediately, expressing his disappointment in the text that he would not be able to see Ashton.

I'm sorry Lucile. Something unexpected has come up. There's something I want to tell you, but I have to do it in person. I'll see you tomorrow. Take care mate

Ashton put the phone back in his pocket, glancing about him.
It was quiet where he was now. It was just another part of the city, a more secluded place. He could see a few people walking to and fro going about their business. Nobody was near him though, and Edmund was out of sight.
Ashton clenched his jaw, frowning to himself.
He thought then of the last words that he and Edmund had exchanged.
'How did you get into my room?'
'What can I say?' Edmund shrugged teasingly. 'I'm really sneaky…'

‘So, what happens now?’
‘We will meet each other again. But you have to act surprised. I’m not supposed to have arrived here yet. No one knows.’
‘Um…ok’ Ashton had replied hesitantly. ‘So, um…right…’
‘Anyway’ Edmund went on. ‘I look forward to being properly introduced to you, and I look forward to meeting your family.’
‘Right’ Ashton smiled awkwardly.
‘I’ll see you then’ Edmund had told him, reaching towards him and caressing his cheek tenderly, just for the briefest moment, before turning and walking away, quickly slipping out of view behind one of the other buildings.
Ashton turned and walked away, heading home.

When he walked through the door to his home, he found his sister had been sitting on the steps in the hallway, waiting for him. She straightened as he closed the door behind him, putting the book away.
‘I knew you would come this way’ she said to him with a smile
‘Oh you did?’ Ashton said back to her, smiling in turn.
There were several ways to enter the manor, some more secret than others. Ashton preferred these ones when he was sneaking out as he so often did. Most of the time when he was heading towards the studio to dance.
‘Hey, what are you reading?’ Ashton asked.
‘Now don’t try to distract me’ Alicia frowned at him, pushing the book to the side of the step by the wall before rising to her feet. ‘I’m glad you’re back, I was starting to get a little worried. Well actually’ she corrected herself, ‘the truth is I was worried from the start before you even left the house’ she chuckled lightly. ‘Anyway. I’m just glad you’re back.’
‘Alicia’ Ashton rolled his eyes, walking past her as he headed down the hall. ‘You worry too much.’
‘I know’ Alicia gleamed at him, and he paused to look back at her. ‘But I don’t care. You’re my brother and I love you. It’s my job to worry.’
Ashton watched her for a moment longer, before breaking into a smile himself. He let out a sigh, body relaxing.
‘My silly sister…’
‘So where did you go?’ Alicia asked him, stepping off the lowest step of the stairs and moving closer to him. ‘Did you go to…’ she glanced about herself then, just to make sure there was no one else around them, no parents or servants. ‘Did you go to the studio?’ she asked him in a hushed voice.
‘I wanted to’ Ashton replied quietly. ‘But um…’
He broke off, brow furrowed.
‘What’s wrong?’ Alicia said.
‘I…. I met Edmund.’
‘What?’
Ashton repeated his words, this time looking Alicia directly in the eye.
‘No that’s…not right he…. his ship is not supposed to have arrived yet. He shouldn’t have arrived.’
‘Well I guess I decided to come early’ Ashton replied in a monotone.
‘Where is he now?’

‘I don’t know. He left shortly after…. I mean… we only spent a short time together. I don’t know where he went.’
Alicia just stared back at Ashton, seemingly just as confused as he was.
‘That’s weird’ she mumbled.
‘Yeah’ Ashton said. ‘It is.’
They both stood in silence for a moment, mulling over these thoughts.
‘So’ Alicia began, ‘what are you going to do now?’
‘Dammit I wish there was a way for me to practice’ Ashton uttered under his breath glancing away. ‘I’m supposed to be going to a show tomorrow night.’
Alicia did not ask specifics, but she knew that Ashton was talking about his dancing. Every once in a while, he would perform on stage in front of an audience, which was fine. No one would have recognised him, not in those killer heels and with so much heavy makeup. No one would have known who he was. On one occasion where Alicia did see him in full costume, she had completely looked past him, not recognising him at all. Not until he spoke. She had turned to him in surprise then, recognising her brother by his voice.
‘Ashton….?’
He had smiled many times at that memory. It made him feel confident, the way he could hide right there in plain sight.
‘Are you going to be ok to perform on stage?’ Alicia asked him.
‘Yeah’ Ashton frowned to himself.
He shifted then, stretching his arms up above him, before reaching down to the ground, lifting one of his legs behind him and straight above his head in a perfect stretch, before straightening up again.
‘It does still hurt a little’ he voiced, ‘but I think by the time the show comes around tomorrow night I will be feeling much better. I think I’m just going to stay at home until then. I’ll just spend my time resting and doing stretches to prepare. Dammit I wish I had my own pole to practice at home.
‘Wouldn’t that be the day?’ Alicia chuckled lightly under her breath, holding her hand over her mouth. ‘I think mum and dad would be more likely to get one before you.’
‘I can’t tell them of what I do’ Ashton mumbled glancing away uncomfortably. ‘Where are they by the way?’
‘Who knows?’ Alicia just shrugged at him. ‘I for one am really enjoying some peace and quiet.’
‘Oh.’
‘It’s noisy in both my homes it seems, my current with the children, and my old with mum and dad.’
‘You got that right’ Ashton smiled, hunching his shoulders at her. ‘Is mum still mad at me?’
‘I don’t know. Probably. You know how she gets. She can be overprotective at times.’
‘Yeah.’
‘Anyway’ Alicia said, half-turning away then. ‘I’m going to get back to my book. It’s actually really good.’
‘Cool. Well you have fun.’
‘Are you going to stay in your room?’
‘Yeah’ Ashton said beginning to walk away. ‘I will probably be there until the show.’
‘You will come down to eat, though won’t you?’
‘Of course.’
‘And if you don’t, I’ll just bring food to you in your room’ Alicia gleamed.
Ashton paused then, glancing back at her. He smiled then, before looking ahead.

He left the hall.

The next day, early in the evening after dinner, Ashton snuck out of the manor again.
He glanced back briefly to see his sister watching him from one of the upstairs windows.
She waved at him, and he smiled back at her, before turning away and slipping into the cover of the trees, heading towards the little gate that led out of the property. One of many that were hidden from view and rarely used by anyone other than himself.
He liked that.
He walked through the city, checking around him several times to make absolutely sure he was not being followed. Edmund still was lingering at the back of his mind. He didn't want to meet him, not today.
Today, he wanted to dance, only to dance and nothing more.
He didn't want Edmund to find him again, and so, he took several twists and turns to make sure that he was not being followed, even circling back on himself. At one point he simply stopped at a corner, watching all around him. He only continued on when he was satisfied that Edmund was not around.
Finally, at long last, Ashton reached the studio.
He paused at the entrance briefly, glancing behind him one last time, before slipping through the door.
He breathed a sigh of relief, feeling instantly at ease once he was inside.
Just being here in this place put his mind to rest, it calmed him, made him feel safe.
He glanced up then, hearing the sound of footsteps coming towards him.
His teacher came from around the corner, her eyes lighting up at the sight of him.
'Ashton?'
'Michelle!'
He ran forwards, stopping just before her, grinning like a fool from ear to ear.
'It's so great to see you again' he said to her.
'What happened to your face?' Michelle asked him uncertainly, frowning at him. 'And where on earth have you been?'
Ashton's hand went to his cheek then, where there was a small graze.
'Oh. I forgot about that. I had a little accident.'
'An accident?'
Around the corner then came another figure, then two more. These were some of the other students. They were in the middle of a lesson.
The first figure was a boy named Lucile, a frequent visitor to this studio. Ashton had first met him here in one of their lessons. Lucile was aged fourteen. He and Ashton had known each other for only about a year, but in that time, the two had become good friends.
'Ashton you're finally back, I was starting to get worried. Hey what happened to your face?'
The figures following after him were both girls, aged about seventeen. These were Michelle's daughters. They had taken after their mother in their love for dancing. They were both dedicated and passionate. They practically lived here. Some days spending more time here than at home. Ashton was envious of them.
'Oh look, the young lord is back' one of the girls said. Her tone was teasing, but affectionate.
'Where have you been?'
'I'm sorry Sophia' Ashton said to her. 'Things have been…a little crazy lately.'
'Lucile told us that you were going to get married, that you were engaged. Is that true?' the other sister named Christa asked.
Ashton glanced towards Lucile then, who looked away sheepishly.
'Sorry' he mumbled, 'you probably wanted to tell them yourself.'

‘It’s ok’ Ashton smiled, looking back towards the sisters and their mother. ‘It’s true’ he said to them. I’m um…. engaged to a man called…Edmund.’
‘Oh waw’ Christa said.
‘I’ll never understand you royal folks’ said Sophia, rolling her eyes and folding her arms. ‘Such a strange lot.’
‘I didn’t choose this you know!’ Ashton cried defensively. ‘I didn’t have a choice.’
‘That’s why I said you folks are strange’ she continued. ‘It’s just an odd arrangement if you ask me. An arranged marriage? It’s just odd.’
‘Anyway’ Christa interrupted, shooting a glare towards her sister. ‘What is he like? You’ve met this Edmund yes?’
‘Um…’ Ashton suddenly averted his gaze then, looking at his feet. ‘I need to think about this’ he mumbled, speaking almost as if to himself. ‘I have a lot on my mind. I just need to clear my thoughts. Could we just go practice now?’
‘Of course,’ Michelle chimed in. ‘Girls go back to practicing’ she said ushering her daughters away. ‘Leave Ashton be for a minute.’
The sisters went back into the other room, Lucile following after them.
He glanced back at Ashton with a smile, pausing briefly before looking ahead again.
‘So, what exactly was this accident?’ Michelle asked him then once they were alone again.
As she said this, she reached towards his face, touching his skin lightly over the bruises and cuts, before her hand moved down to his collar, pulling it over his shoulder slightly where she saw there another graze.
She drew her hand back.
‘What on earth were you doing?’
‘I was climbing the cliffs with my sister’ Ashton answered reluctantly. ‘I um…slipped.’
Michelle frowned at him. She said nothing, but Ashton knew she was very displeased.
She cared a lot for Ashton, and worried about him. He knew this, even though she didn’t say, he could see it in her expression and demeanour. She loved him like a son.
‘Will you be ok to dance?’
‘Yes, I want to’ Ashton said quickly without a pause.
‘Are you sure?’
‘Yes yes.’
Michelle smiled down at Ashton then, though she continued to frown.
‘Alright’ she said. ‘Get changed, I’ll meet you in the other room.’
Ashton went to the small dressing room, finding his clothes. He dressed gingerly, finally straightening up.
He looked at himself in the mirror, smiling widely at his reflection.
He wore a flesh-coloured garment that hugged his frame, leaving most of his skin naked.
But he felt happy this way, he felt himself. His smile flickered slightly; his brow creased. He noticed the cuts and bruises on his body were clearly visible.
‘Now that won’t do’ came a voice from behind him, and he turned to see Michelle standing there in the doorway.
She unfolded her arms, sauntering over towards him, still smiling.
‘You must have taken quite a tumble’ she said to him.
‘Yeah’ Ashton replied sheepishly. ‘I did kinda…’
‘It’s ok I can fix this’ Michelle went on, moving past him and over to the drawers. She began to open several of the draws, pulling out some items. It was makeup. Ashton loved wearing makeup. He had not perfected the art of applying it himself, but he was learning. Most of the time however, Michelle would do it for him.
She beaconed him to her, and Ashton padded forwards.

He waited patiently as Michelle applied his makeup, using glitter to cover up the bruises on his body. As always, she liked to paint his face heavily, but it was beautiful, and it was showy.
When Michelle had finally finished, Ashton opened his eyes.
He turned and looked at himself in the mirror, stepping forwards to see himself clearer.
His eyes were lined in black, and there were patterns of gold and red painted around his eyes, the look finished off with sequins.
The lower part of his face was painted pale orange, fading into yellow and white, with lips bright red and luscious.
'I still don't know how you do this so fast' Ashton smiled, continuing to admire himself in the mirror. 'I want to be as good as you at this someday.'
'You will be one day' Michelle said absent-mindedly, moving up beside him and using more paint and glitter to hide the bruises over his body.
She straightened.
'There' she said stepping back and finally putting the little pots away. 'You look wonderful. Now hurry up and get dancing. Remember to do your stretches first.'
'Yes teacher' Ashton beamed joyfully back at her as she began to tidy the makeup pots away.
He knew how important the stretches were before practice. And Michelle would absolutely insist that everyone did them before approaching the pole.
Ashton entered the main studio, the largest room in the small building. It was nothing but an empty hall before a mirror that lined the entire wall on one side. There were no windows here, and so they were secluded here in their paradise, this little world that they shared together.
The others turned as Ashton approached, followed shortly after by Michelle.
'Looking nice' Lucile called out, seeing Ashton's painted face.
'Thanks' Ashton replied a little sheepish. 'You should really try some makeup on yourself.'
'Nah' his friend waved away. 'I don't like the way it feels. It's too heavy on my face, plus anything around my eyes makes my eyes water.'
'But you would look amazing painted up' Ashton protested.
'You think so?'
Ashton blushed a little at that, turning away quickly then. But his reddening cheeks were not noticeable, not behind all the makeup.
'Come on Ashton' Michelle said sternly from behind him. 'You've been absent for days. Hurry up and do your stretches so you can practice, and tell me if anything hurts.'
'I'll be fine I promise' Ashton answered quickly back.
Michelle only chuckled at this. 'As determined as always' she raised an eyebrow at him. 'I swear as soon as you get ready to dance you become a different person entirely. There is a fire in your soul, and I like it.'
Ashton tilted his head playfully at her, hands on his hips he rolled his shoulders, winking at her teasingly.
She came up behind him then, placing her hands upon his shoulders and whispering into his ear.
'Alright Hotstuff. Show us what you got.'
Upon hearing his stage name, even at a whisper in the echoing hall, the sisters stopped their practicing, looking over towards him.
Ashton was grinning excitedly. A wild fire ignited in his heart.

After a brief warm up, he approached the pole, glancing to the side towards Michelle. The others were waiting at the edge of the hall, watching him, Sophia, Christa and Lucile. Michelle's attention lingered on him for a moment, before reaching for the music player, and pressing the play button.
The music began, the melody soft and pure and gentle.

Ashton grabbed the pole, leaping up.
Spinning around the pole, slower and faster at will. To him the world was spinning, but his mind was not occupied by this, but instead only of dancing. Twisting his body around the pole as he swung around and around it, turning his body upside-down with ease, hanging there for a moment as he spun around the pole slowly now, staring at the floor above his head, his hair hanging down, before righting himself. Holding his body now horizontal to the pole, his muscular arms supporting his weight with ease, holding his legs in the perfect split for a few moments, before turning himself upside-down again, clinging to the pole tightly now, his body wrapped around it as he began spinning faster and faster.
He finished gracefully with a flurry of movement, arching his back, one hand extended outwards, the other still grasping the pole.
The others began to clap, great smiles upon their faces, Michelle also.
Ashton relaxed his body, facing the others again, beaming brightly.
Inside he felt a glow within his chest, his heart was soaring. He felt only pure happiness.
'It feels so good to dance again' he sighed. 'It's been a few days…'
'We've missed you' Michelle smiled widely. 'How are you feeling?'
On hearing this question, Ashton suddenly felt the aches in his body fresh, doubling over then.
'Ow ow ow…'
Michelle chuckled lightly at that. She approached him, reaching out to touch him, beginning to poke and prod him.
'Ow…what are you…ow!'
'Are you sure you're going to be ok to dance?' Michelle said to him.
'Yes I am!' Ashton said hastily then, almost beginning to panic. 'I want to do it; I CAN do it!'
Michelle only smiled lovely at him, but said nothing else.
She stepped back.
'Alright then. Just rest for a minute then keep practicing.'
'Thank you so much' Ashton grinned widely. 'So, I um…. can do the show tonight still?'
'Of course you can' Michelle replied.
'Oh thank god' Ashton sighed heavily with relief. 'I thought for a moment that you would swap me for someone else.'
'I know how much you've been looking forward to this' Michelle replied. 'I wouldn't take that away from you.'
'Thank you so much' Ashton giggled bashfully. 'I can't wait.'
'Good, now go and rest, you can watch the others practice.'
Ashton nodded, moving off to the side to sit on the bench as the others moved forwards, taking up their positions, each before their own pole.
Michelle began to speak to all of them, beginning the lesson, her voice was clear, resounding in the large room.
Ashton leant back against the wall behind him, watching the others. He felt happy, but his body felt tired. He had not done anything particularly strenuous, but his body still ached all over. He would never however let the others know how sore he still was, he was grateful to Michelle however for the makeup and the glitter she had applied on him. He touched his own body tentatively, feeling the bruise on his shoulder, hidden by the glitter.
He lowered his hand again, looking away from the three figures dancing before him, guided by Michelle's instructions.
Ashton glanced to his side, seeing his own reflection staring back at him.
He didn't turn his eyes away, instead continued to watch himself, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side.
He couldn't help admiring himself, and couldn't help but think, how fabulous he looked this way, in his dancing clothes, his face and body bright with colours.

Ashton found himself thinking then, how incredible he would look during the actual show tonight. He looked beautiful now, later he would look even better.
'Are you admiring yourself again?'
Ashton was caught off guard suddenly, looking sharply around towards Lucile who had spoken. His friend took a seat beside him on the bench.
'I wasn't!' he protested.
'Yeah you were.'
Ashton groaned a little, hunching his shoulders.
'There's nothing wrong with it' Lucile assured him. 'I was just saying, you look like you were in a trance.'
'I just have a lot on my mind' Ashton replied.
'Oh, what were you going to tell me?'
Ashton frowned himself then, brow furrowed.
'Is it about what you text me earlier?' Lucile asked.
'Y-yeah.'
Lucile pursed his lips, leaning forwards with his elbows on his knees.
'So, you're going to get married' he said.
'Yeah' Ashton repeated. 'I don't know how to feel about it.'
Lucile looked away.
'I wouldn't know how to feel about it either… such a concept is so foreign to me. The idea of arranged marriages? Well I guess it's something practiced only by lords and ladies still.'
'Yeah' Ashton mumbled, dropping his gaze. 'I guess it would seem kinda weird to an outsider.'
Lucile looked at his friend then.
'So what are you going to do?'
'I have to marry him' Ashton replied. 'I don't have a choice. It's what my family wants.'
Lucile looked away again, a frown upon his face.
'It seems so unfair' he mumbled. 'Who would you want to marry if the choice was yours?' Lucile asked him.
'Nobody right now' Ashton replied without a pause. 'I just…want to live my own life first before I commit to anything. I don't know…there's still so much about the world that I don't know yet. I feel like getting married is far too soon. But it's what my family wants…and it's what is expected of me. So….'
Lucile pursed his lips.
'What is Edmund like?' he asked Ashton.
'I don't know yet.'
They sit in silence for a time, both just staring off into space, each preoccupied with their own thoughts.
Eventually the sisters finished their practice, and went away to go cool off and rest.
Michelle approached Ashton and Lucile then, looking over Ashton who glanced up at her, noticing her as she drew closer.
'Are you nervous about the show tonight?' she asked him.
'Not even a little' Ashton smirked.
Michelle nodded approvingly at that.
'Good' Michelle answered. 'I'm so glad. I can't wait to see you on stage.'

Later that night…

Ashton began to dance, feeling like electricity was coursing through his body. His flowing half-skirt swirling around him as he swung around the pole again and again, contorting his body,

twisting his body, the music enveloping his very being. He flipped himself over, upside down now, holding his body straight and parallel to the pole, his legs split, one pointed towards the ceiling, the other towards the floor.
The crowd cheered and whistled for him. Ashton felt so *alive*. He felt so powerful.
Nobody knew who he really was, not in this disguise, with his wig and heavy makeup, no one could ever have guessed. That made him feel good.
He continued to spin around the pole, faster and faster, turning upside down, righting himself again, moving at impossibly high speeds, his movements flawless, graceful and smooth.
He felt wild, unstoppable.
At the end of his routine, the heavy music pulsing all around him in time with his beating heart and heavy breath, he straightened up, before arching his spine backwards, one hand on the pole, the other in the air. His false hair falling about his shoulders as his chest rose and fell quickly.
He stared up at the ceiling now, gasping, his body trembling slightly with excitement.
He felt so hot now, his body beginning to sweat. It was humid in this place with all the bodies.
Ashton relaxed at last, stepping away from the pole and lowering his arm.
He took a step forwards, closer towards the edge of the stage, with a flourishing motion from his arms and a low bow, he heard the crowd cheering for him again. His eyes shone bright with pride as he heard his name being called by the loud voice that announced all the dancers, and people began to call out his name.
Hotstuff.
Ashton straightened again, striking a pose as the lights flared all around him. His eyes looked over the crowd, seeing the faces of those in the club, the men staring back at him.
His heart leapt in his chest suddenly spotted someone he knew, a face he recognised.
'Edmund?'
But his voice was lost in the noise. He barely even heard himself.
'Hotstuff!'
Ashton glanced around then, noticing someone backstage calling out to him and gesturing him to get off stage. The next dancer beside him ready to take the pole.
Ashton waved to the crowd one last time before turning on his heels and striding away, towards the curtain, as the next dancer stepped forward, passing him by to the sound of renewed cheers.
'What's gotten into you?' the man, one of the organisers who worked backstage and ran the show, making sure everything went smoothly and as it should. 'Were you spacing out back there? We don't have time for that.'
'Sorry' Ashton mumbled.
'Go wash real quick' the man said to him. 'There's someone who wants a private show from you.'
'A what?' Ashton answered quickly.
'You've done those before' the man replied, distracted now as he went about his business, trying to organise the next show, checking through papers, calling out to people and making sure everything was ready. 'You know the deal. They can look but they can't touch. If you feel uncomfortable just press the button.'
Every private booth had a hidden button that the dancers could press if they felt uncomfortable in any way. It was rarely pressed, but it was there just for safety and peace of mind. Most of the patrons were well behaved. Some had been known to get a little physical however. Luckily Ashton had not experienced this sort of patron before.
'For the love of all that is good…' Ashton uttered to himself, 'please don't let it be Edmund.'

No one heard him however, the man he had been talking to had already moved on, tapping away at the computer nearby and changing the lights and the sounds that were onstage, where the next performance that was going on.
Ashton pushed his worries to the back of his mind, swallowing the lump in his throat.
He didn't look at the man again, just stepped forwards, frowning to himself, feeling a little uncertain.
He washed himself quickly and changed into fresh dancing clothes, re-applying his makeup.
He was cool now, and made his way to the private booth for a one on one dance, himself, and a patron.
He had done this only once before, and that time had been fine. He didn't know the man, and he had never seen him again.
This time however….

……...it was Edmund.

Chapter Nine

Ashton waited outside the small room, shoulders hunched, hands knitted together.
He took several slow and steady breaths, trying to fight down his nerves, before straightening up. He held his shoulders back in a confident pose as he faced the plain door that stood before him.
This was a quieter part of the club, a long hallway set away from the main part of the club where the performances were held. The building was soundproof, and Ashton could hear not a single thing from the rest of the building. No music, no people. But he knew he would be safe if anything went wrong or he began to feel uncomfortable within the room before him. All the private rooms had a 'help button', there were no cameras within the rooms, but there were a few within the hallway outside.
Inside each of the small private rooms there was a hidden button, a large plate set within the wall, near the dancing pole. If any one of these plates were pressed, a hulking security guard would come storming from the office down the hall. He would sit for hours in his office, watching the cameras and breaking up any fights or scuffles, not that such a thing would happen often. Just appearing on the scene would cause most to suddenly behave themselves and comply with requests. Though for the most part within the club, things were peaceful.
At this moment, Ashton felt glad for the presence of the security man within the building. It was not that he felt unsafe or threatened in any way, it was more of…the comfort…the thought of the security man just being there, in case anything was to happen.
Ashton let out another steady breath to calm himself, blinking slowly.
He lowered his hands, relaxing his shoulders.
Ashton glanced to the floor-length mirror set on the wall beside the door, glancing over himself one last time before entering the room, before going past the point of no return. There was a mirror beside each door, just to check yourself over one last time to make sure that everything

was in place. Ashton looked astounding. His lean and muscular body, shoulders and belly and legs bare, he was painted in makeup that was scattered here and there, glitter and bright colours, mostly to hide the bruises from his fall from the cliffs earlier.
And his face….
He didn't like being vain, but he thought to himself at that moment, how handsome he looked.
But most importantly.
He didn't look like himself.
Surely Edmund won't recognise me he thought quickly, before gathering himself one last time, and reaching for the door handle.
He opened the door, stepping into the room before he had time to hesitate.
The music within the rooms was always playing, sexy, seductive and with a sick beat.
Ashton walked into the room, stopping and turning his head to the side.
He saw Edmund sitting there, upon the bench at the back of the small room.
Edmund sat leaning forwards, elbows resting on his knees and eyes wide and eager, trailing down Ashton's body, before going up again and looking into his face.
He did not seem to recognise him.
Perfect.
Ashton looked away, as the door swung shut behind him.
He reached for the pole beside him, striking a pose, throwing his head back, his legs straight, back arched. The light material of his long half-skirt sweeping around his ankles.
He lifted his arm, twisting it around the pole slowly, before leaping up, grasping the pole with his thighs, turning slowly around the pole as he raised his free arm, running his hand up his chest, up his neck and through his hair.
He spun around the pole, faster and faster, turning himself upside down, legs split, climbing higher and higher up the pole and he continued to spin around before flipping himself upside down, turning in the air and landing lightly, cat-like on the floor in a crouching positing, before rising again, stroking his chest and belly against the pole again before continuing to dance.
Feeling the music around him, like a physical presence touching his body, he leapt at the pole again, grabbing it and swinging around it, turning upside down and arching his body, looking up at Edmund then still sitting on the bench.
Edmund watched him keenly, never taking his eyes away from him. But he seemed a little agitated, shifting, leaning back, before leaning forwards again, foot shaking.
Ashton tilted his head back, upside down still, he stared above him at the floor, turning slowly now around the pole. His false hair hanging there as he ran his free hand down his chest, holding the pole with his muscular legs now.
He changed positions, lifting his body with ease horizontal to the pole, before turning again and ending the move gracefully, in complete control as he lowered his body to the floor carefully, ending in a perfect split, throwing his head back, staring up at the ceiling now, panting slightly, feeling a little flushed.
He heard movement then, and looked forwards, to see Edmund had risen from his bench, and was approaching him.
Ashton gathered his legs beneath him then, rising to his feet, shoulders hunched, hands balled over his chest.
His eyes were wide, and he let out a slight gasp as Edmund stopped before him.
Ashton remained frozen where he stood, leaning slightly back, away from Edmund.
He wanted to speak, but was afraid to do so, afraid that his voice would give him away.

And so, he remained silent.
Edmund continued to stare at him, his eyes hawk-like.
He raised his arms, stepping forwards, closing the space between them. Edmund embraced him slowly then, bowing his head, breathing into his neck.
Ashton's eyes were wide as he stared up at the ceiling, feeling lost. His arms limp by his side.
Edmund spoke suddenly, speaking Ashton's name, the only one he knew him as.
'Hotstuff. That's your name isn't it?'
Ashton did not speak, feeling his heart pounding against his ribcage.
He was sure Edmund could feel it.
Oh please, help….
Edmund drew back then, but did not let go of him.
'What is your real name?' Edmund whispered. 'I *have* to know who you are. I…. oh my god…' he whispered, 'your dancing is absolutely beautiful. I love your dancing, you're so beautiful, your body is so flawless. I have to know who you are. I want to know your real name.'
Ashton began to tremble slightly, tears of fear brimming in his eyes.
He drew a shuddering breath.
Edmund tilted his head.
'What's wrong?' he asked, letting go of him, 'are you shy? I don't mean to scare you.'
Ashton swallowed nervously, trying to control himself.
'I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I just…I had to speak to you alone. I had to…I just…...want you to myself.'
'Hm?' Ashton managed to utter; his voice feeble.
'Why don't you speak?' Edmund asked.
Ashton said nothing, but continued to stare at Edmund, body tense, like a rabbit trapped in headlights.
Edmund stepped forwards again, hands slipping around Ashton's body for the second time, but this time with a little more force.
Ashton was about to speak at that moment but was cut off, as Edmund began to kiss him.
His heart twisted in his chest.
'Hotstuff' Edmund whispered in his ear, breaking away from the kiss briefly. 'Tell me your name' he uttered. 'Tell me your name…' Edmund bowed his head, kissing Ashton's neck, trailing his tongue further up his skin, biting his ear lightly.
Ashton flinched at this, drawing a sharp intake of breath between his teeth.
He let out a gasp as he felt a touch between his legs. Edmund caressed Ashton then.
Ashton tried to pull away from him then, reaching for the 'help' button.
But Edmund grabbed him by the wrist, continuing to kiss him.
Ashton stepped back, allowing Edmund to advance on him. He was trapped now, between the wall and Edmund. His eyes were wide, and his mind blank.
Help me…what do I do….?
'Tell me your real name' Edmund whispered between kisses. 'Tell me your name'
Ashton let out a sob, his knees weak and shaking, he was unable to hold himself up any longer.
Ashton collapsed to the floor, legs folded either side of him as he whimpered, biting his fist hard as he tried to control himself.
Edmund stared down at him in shock, eyes wide.
For the longest time, he didn't know what to do or what to say. He didn't know what to make of this, so he just stood there.

After a few moments, Ashton had somewhat controlled himself, and reluctantly looked back up at Edmund, eyes pleading.
He met his gaze, Edmund held his stare for a time, before lowering himself to the ground slowly, kneeling before Ashton.
'I'm sorry Hotstuff' he whispered to him. 'I didn't realise you were so…' he broke off then, swallowing uncertainly. 'I didn't realise…. I thought you were….' His words trailed off, and he was silent for a moment before speaking again. 'You were so wild and bold on stage; I didn't realise you were like this.'
'Why are you doing this?' Ashton finally said, breaking his silence. 'Why are you doing this?'
Edmund gave a small start, staring at Ashton with a peculiar expression, his attention fixated on him, brow slightly furrowed.
'What did you just say?'
Ashton bit his tongue, glaring at Edmund, feeling suddenly angry.
'What did you just say?' Edmund repeated.
'Why are you doing this?' Ashton said again, this time speaking with more force. 'You are supposed to be getting married!'
Edmund slowly rose to his feet, never breaking eye contact.
'……Ashton?'
Ashton only gritted his teeth, glaring even harder.
'How can you be coming to a place like this?' Ashton hissed, his rage only growing. 'How can you ask for a private showing like this? You're not being loyal.'
Edmund was silent for a moment, before snapping out of his trance, gathering himself.
'Are you serious?' Edmund retorted. 'That's a bit rich. I mean look at you!'
Ashton flushed bright red then, his resolve crumbling.
'How could you be in a club like this, seducing men when you're supposed to be getting married?' Edmund spoke accusingly.
'No, it isn't like that!' Ashton said beginning to panic. 'It's just a hobby. It's an art! It's not supposed to be physical in any way…' Ashton begun to rub his eyes with the back of his hand, smudging his makeup. 'It isn't like that….'
Edmund shifted then, reaching for his back pocket.
Ashton quickly fell silent, glancing up at Edmund, wondering what he was doing.
Edmund brought out his mobile, snapping a quick picture of Ashton.
'What are you doing?!'
'I want to remember this moment' Edmund replied.
Ashton rose quickly to his feet, trying to snatch the mobile from him, but Edmund was too quick, whipping it out of his reach.
'What's your problem?' Edmund asked lightly then, almost teasingly. 'Don't you trust me?'
Ashton gritted his teeth, angry, hurt and confused. He didn't know what to do.
Edmund put his mobile away quickly, straightening.
'You look absolutely gorgeous' Edmund said, raising an eyebrow, his sights trailed over Ashton's body as he admired him. 'So fiery, so wild. I cannot believe it's really you.'
'Please' Ashton begged him, clasping his hands together. 'Please don't tell anyone about this. Please keep this a secret. You *have* to. This is my life. I can't let others know…my family….'
He broke off sharply, gritting his teeth as his emotions threatened to overflow.
'Relax' Edmund smirked, his cocky demeanour back again. 'You can trust me. I won't tell a soul.'

‘Really?’ Ashton gasped, feeling suddenly hope fluttering in his heart.
‘Of course,’ Edmund winked back at him. ‘If you do something for me.’
Ashton felt the hopeful sensation begin to simmer down, a twinge of nervousness within him now.
‘Um…w-what?’
Edmund smirked at Ashton then, his look predatory.
‘I want to make love to you’ Edmund said. ‘I want to have you. Right here right now.’
Ashton went bright red.
‘I love how awkward you are’ Edmund spoke quickly, his body seemed to shiver with excitement. ‘It’s really cute.’
‘I c-can’t do something like that!’
‘Why not?’ Edmund asked lightly.
‘I can’t’ Ashton repeated. ‘I just…I’m not ready.’
‘You know it will happen’ Edmund continued. ‘We are a couple after all. We are to be married. Why not do it now?’
‘I’m not ready’ Ashton repeated. ‘And um…I-I don’t want to do it yet…n-not here.’
‘What’s wrong with here?’
‘I just….’ Ashton said flustered. ‘It’s not the right place. I…it should be a special moment.’
‘Are you top or bottom?’
Ashton baulked then, hunching his shoulders, looking suddenly terrified. If it was possible to go even redder, he did.
‘You said before that you were a virgin.’ Edmund voiced, suddenly out of the blue.
‘Hu?’
They stared at each other awkwardly then.
‘Hmm’ Edmund purred at him, scratching his chin. ‘So, I will be your first? That is a very exciting thought.’
Ashton didn’t know what to say, and so he said nothing, simply pursing his lips.
‘Ok’ Edmund said, ‘I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, I want to come to love you, I want you to feel happy with me…but I just…can’t resist you. I won’t penetrate you now. But I can’t leave this room without getting something from you.’
Ashton swallowed nervously.
Edmund reached out to Ashton, caressing his cheek with the back of his hand briefly, before turning it over, trailing his middle finger across Ashton’s lips.
‘I want to…I want to suck your cock’ Edmund whispered, speaking with sincerity.
‘What?’ Ashton mumbled. ‘I-I d-don’t know…. I’ve never…’
‘Trust me…’ Edmund whispered to him, moving closer to him, speaking quietly into his ear. ‘Trust me.’
Ashton did not reply; he could not speak at that time. But he did not resist either.
Edmund took this opportunity, glancing towards him.
‘I’ll make you feel good’ Edmund whispered. ‘I’ll make you feel soooo good…’
He trailed his fingertips down Ashton’s body, lower, across his belly, and lower again.
Ashton let out a slight groan, tensing as Edmund began to caress him between the legs tenderly.
‘Relax’ Edmund breathed. ‘Relax. I know what I’m doing.’
Ashton said nothing.
Edmund began to kiss him again, briefly on the lips, just a quick peck, before moving further down, kissing him along his jawline, down his throat, across his shoulders, down.

Down.
Edmund kissed his belly, grasping Ashton firmly by the hips.
Ashton brought his fist to his mouth, biting his knuckle to stop himself from crying out.
Edmund paused only briefly, glancing up at Ashton, before moving his hand, caressing him yet again.
Ashton leant back, unable to stop himself from moaning.
Edmund turned away, bowing his head and breathing calmly, blinking slowly.
'You're beginning to get hard' Edmund mumbled. 'Does that feel good?'
'Mm…y-yeah.'
'I can make it feel better…'
Edmund put his hand at the top of Ashton's clothing, pulling the elastic gently down, revealing Ashton, exposing him then.
Ashton flinched, feeling Edmund place his mouth around him.
He let out another moan, unable to stop himself as Edmund began to work.
It was such a great feeling, and was unlike anything Ashton had experienced before.
He finally finished, and Edmund began coughing, trying to clear his throat, before swallowing deeply.
He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, before glancing up at Ashton with a smile.
'I will keep your secret' Edmund uttered, before rising to his feet. 'I swear that I won't tell anyone. I won't tell anyone you're a secret dancer, if you don't tell anyone I was here.'
'Ok' Ashton gasped breathlessly.
'You can trust me.'
'I know.'
Edmund wiped his mouth with the back of his hand again, letting out a sigh.
He put a finger to his own lips then, winking at Ashton.
'This secret stays between us' Edmund spoke quietly. 'Ok?'
'Ok' Ashton said again.
Edmund turned away, heading to the door.
He paused then, glancing back briefly.
'I'll see you again soon' Edmund grinned at him, before turning away.
Ashton was left alone in the room.

Chapter Ten

Later, Ashton found himself feeling incredibly guilty, though he didn't know why.
It was the day after his encounter with Edmund in the club, and Ashton was waiting in the entrance hall of his home, standing awkwardly with the rest of his family around him. His sister to one side, and his parents on the other. His mother bobbing happily on her feet, hands held before her.
'Mum will you stop please?' Alicia spoke patiently to her. 'We're trying to make a good first impression. We only have one chance to do that.'

‘I’m sorry dear’ Maya chuckled sheepishly, putting a hand to her face and grinning at her daughter. ‘I’m just so excited. I’m so excited! Are you excited Ashton?’ she said turning to him.
Ashton mumbled awkwardly, feeling suddenly in the spotlight.
‘Oh. Yes, I guess I am. It would be a lie though if I said I wasn’t a little nervous.’
‘Of course you are!’ his father spoke then in his booming voice. ‘It would be peculiar if you weren’t nervous. It means you care for him. Isn’t that wonderful?!’
‘Oh my gosh!’ Maya cried out then, clasping her hands together and lifting her leg excitedly, her toe pointed towards the ceiling. ‘Doesn’t this remind you my dear…?’
‘What does it remind you of my love?’ Isaac asked, grasping both her hands in his own firmly.
‘Young love!’ Maya cried excitedly, eyes shining bright as she stared up at her husband in adoration. ‘Remember when we were so young and carefree?’
‘You’ve always been carefree’ Alicia added in a quiet tone, speaking from Ashton’s other side.
Ashton cast her a quick glance, smiling warmly at her.
‘All these years and we’re still in love’ Isaac spoke tenderly to his wife as she leaned into him, arching her body backwards, face turned up to his.
‘Oh my love Isaac. I love you more than my own existence, more than my very own life! I would do absolutely anything for you! I would cross the galaxy, cross the stars…to find you….to be by your side.’
‘You won’t have to do that my flower’ Isaac cooed at her, ‘because I will never leave your side…’
Maya’s eyes began to brim with tears, and she whimpered up at her husband, enveloped in his muscular arms. ‘Oh Isaac…...Isaac.’
‘Get it together’ Alicia hissed urgently to them both.
After a certain point both she and Ashton generally had begun to ignore their parents when they started to behave like this. They had never grown tired of fawning over one another, and it was perfectly normal for one or both of them to end up in tears, crying about how much they loved each other and could not live without the other.
It was exhausting for everyone else around them.
‘You have to keep it under control’ Alicia continued, as beside her Ashton had become tense, staring ahead as he saw the double doors of the entrance hall slowly beginning to open. ‘Remember, you’ve got only one chance to make a first impression.’
Isaac and Maya let go of one another, but continued to stand close together. Isaac looking very serious and tall as he straightened up, furrowing his brow in an exaggerated expression. Beside him, Maya continued to hold onto the crook of his arm, grasping him lightly with one hand. With her other hand, she had brought out a white handkerchief, dabbing at her tears delicately.
Ashton supressed a groan, looking away from them and again towards the double doors before them, steeling himself, clenching his fists and swallowing the lump in his throat.
This is it…
Several figures entered the hallway, servants carrying luggage, important official figures, an advisor, a writer who would record everything that would happen in relation to the coming wedding.
Isaac tilted his head slightly, eyes roving over the heads of the men before him.
‘Where is Edmund?’ he voiced. ‘And I see no members of his family. Hmmm. What is going on?’
One of the officials spoke, after briefly introducing himself.

‘Edmund travelled ahead of us’ the older gentleman informed them. ‘We have not seen him in a long while.’
‘Hm?’ Isaac blinked curiously at that.
Ashton and Alicia only stared at the official before them.
Maya and Isaac glanced at one another, both wearing confused expressions.
‘Edmund…’ Maya uttered, ‘…is already here?’
‘I am sorry to deceive you’ came an echoing voice all of a sudden, and Ashton and his family all turned, looking up towards the top of the wide set of stairs behind them.
Leaning against a great column on the balcony above them, stood Edmund, arms folded, and eyes gleaming as he stared down at the figures before him.
Alicia looked on with silent curiosity, tilting her head slightly up at him. Isaac remained frozen, Maya also, but her eyes were shimmering with emotion.
Ashton, felt nothing.
He didn’t know how to feel, he didn’t fully grasp the situation, even now. He was at the centre of everything that was happening, but still could not comprehend it.
‘Ashton, my love’ Edmund spoke clearly then, unfolding his arms and straightening up. ‘It is so wonderful to meet you at last.’

Ashton stood fixed to the spot, unable to move, unable to speak.
All eyes were on him. He was the centre of attention in the room, though he barely noticed.
Maya was the only one within the room who moved now, glancing from Edmund to Ashton and back again.
‘Oh waw!’ she cried out excitedly, clapping her hands enthusiastically and bouncing up and down on the spot. ‘What fun! How exciting!’
Edmund glanced towards her, giving her a curious expression.
She grasped the skirt of her dress then, hurrying up the stairs.
Edmund continued to watch her as she approached.
Maya reached the top of the stairs, pausing briefly before rushing forwards, sweeping him up in a tight embrace.
Edmund blinked in surprise at this, frozen for a moment in surprise before holding her back, smiling a wide and genuine smile.
Maya let go of him, grinning at him widely, holding both his hands tenderly in her own.
‘It’s so wonderful to have finally met you!’ Maya gushed. ‘I can already tell you that I love you already. Oh my gosh, and you are so handsome!’
Edmund stared at her speechless for a moment, before flushing slightly, glancing away.
‘I…d…don’t know what to say’ he mumbled to the floor.
‘Oh my gosh you are wonderful!’ Maya cried out.
‘Wife, please leave the poor boy alone!’ Isaac called out to her from the bottom of the stairs, holding onto the banister. ‘You don’t want him to feel suffocated.’
‘Ashton!’ Maya called out, turning and grinning down at him. ‘Hurry up and come along. You must meet your fiancé.’
Ashton pursed his lips, stepping forwards.
He ascended the stairs carefully, maintaining eye contact with Edmund, who appeared completely at ease where he stood beside Maya, who still had one hand upon Edmund’s shoulder, and other grasping his arm lightly. Maya was beaming brightly, positively beside herself with glee.

‘Hurry hurry’ Maya said, ushering Ashton closer to them. ‘Come meet your fiancé.’
Maya reached out and grabbed Ashton by the arm as he drew closer, pulling him the rest of the way.
Ashton stumbled a little, nearly falling into Edmund. He stepped back hastily, shoulders raised, feeling uneasy and a little defensive.
Edmund only smiled kindly at him, silently tilting his head towards Ashton, waiting expectantly.
‘Don’t’ be shy my child’ Maya said to Ashton. ‘Say hello. I know this must be awkward for you at first, but in time you two will come to love each other. You will call each other ‘*darling’* and ‘*sweetie’* and ‘*love of my life’*…. Just like your father and I do…’
‘I know’ Edmund voiced then. ‘I…can already feel myself falling in love with you…Ashton’ he said to him, speaking with sincerity. ‘I am so glad to meet you, I’ve been thinking…*yearning* to see you. And I’m so glad I finally have.’
He waited then, waiting for Ashton to speak.
But Ashton was lost for words.
Edmund only chuckled after a time at this, grinning widely.
‘I can’t wait for us to be married’ Edmund said to him. ‘I look forward to spending many long years together.’

Later that day, after Edmund insisted on he and Ashton spending time together, the two found themselves within a grand place.
Within the city, upon the large open balcony of one of the higher buildings, Edmund stared out at the view of the waters before them, the river where the ferries came to and fro.
Edmund leaned forwards against the metal railings, arms folded and one foot resting on the tip of his toe lazily.
Behind him, only a few steps away, Ashton sat at one of the tables, watching him silently.
‘I love this city. Don’t you love this city?’ Edmund asked, turning back to Ashton with a wink.
Ashton met his gaze, giving him a smile in turn, though it didn’t feel entirely natural.
‘I know things will be difficult for us at first’ Edmund said to him, pushing himself away from the rail as he straightened up, turning away from the view and walking back to Ashton, the wind lifting his hair about his face. ‘They will certainly be a little awkward at times, but I want to make this work.’
He joined Ashton at the small round table now, sitting down heavily in his seat.
All around them in the large space, the rest of the customers were happy in their own business, sitting with their friends and family, eating their meals or desserts.
Ashton glanced to the side, seeing an elderly male couple who were sitting and enjoying tea and cakes. They looked to be about in their seventies, and each was reaching across the table for the other. They were holding hands, and smiling at one another as they spoke.
Ashton looked back at Edmund.
He noticed then that Edmund had not looked away from him, but had continued to watch him, leaning forwards on the table, chin resting on his palm.
Ashton quickly averted his gaze, hunching his shoulders. He scratched his palms nervously.
‘You don’t need to be shy around me’ Edmund said to him.
‘I…sorry.’

‘You don’t like me watching you?’
Ashton groaned uncomfortably to himself, finally looking back at Edmund.
‘I want us to be comfortable around each other, I really do. I care about you.’
‘Why?’ Ashton asked. ‘Why do you care about me?’
‘Because I love you’ Edmund replied, eyes lighting up with joy and excitement.
For some reason Ashton felt sadden at this, eyes dropping as he stared at his lap, hands resting on his knees.
‘How can you say that…. when you don’t even know me?’
‘Do you believe in love at first sight?’ Edmund asked him.
‘Hm? I um…. don’t know. I guess I never really thought about it.’
‘*I* didn’t. Not at first. But I do now. I fell in love with you the moment I saw you dancing, even if I didn’t know it was you. *That* is the first time I *truly* saw you.’
Ashton raised his head slightly, casting a glance over at Edmund from across the table.
‘It’s strange’ Edmund went on. ‘It’s almost…. like it was fate. Like we were meant to be together.’
Ashton looked away again, not sure of what to say.
And so he said nothing.
‘Your dancing was incredible’ Edmund breathed, speaking in a hushed voice then. ‘I absolutely had no idea it was you, not with your makeup and outfit…. but when you spoke…’
Ashton listened silently, not responding.
‘I like your name’ Edmund added in a sing-song voice. ‘*Hotstuff*. It’s nice.’
Ashton glanced about him at the other customers sitting at their tables. The waiters and waitresses continued on with their work hurriedly.
Ashton looked back at Edmund and spoke. ‘My teacher came up with the name.’
‘Oh cool! What’s her name?’
‘Um…Michelle.’
‘That’s nice.’
Edmund paused, waiting for some feedback, but Ashton was too nervous to say much else.
‘So um…does she dance too? Your teacher Michelle?’
‘Yes, she’s very good.’
‘I bet you’re better’ Edmund winked at him, leaning further forwards on the table, shooting him a sly grin.
‘Why were you at the club?’ Ashton asked suddenly.
Edmund balked a little, somewhat taken aback.
‘I…’
‘Oh wow’ Ashton chuckled lightly to himself, taking a closer look at Edmund now. ‘Looks like I have *you* lost for words now. That’s a first.’
Edmund laughed a little at that, sounding somewhat uncomfortable.
‘What’s wrong?’ Ashton asked him.
‘I know I probably shouldn’t have gone to a club like that since…you know…I’m supposed to be getting married soon…. *really* soon but…’ he broke off for a moment, before composing himself. ‘The truth is…. I’ve been terrified.’
‘Hm?’
Ashton blinked in surprise at this. This was the last thing he thought he would hear from Edmund.
‘*You* were scared?’

‘Yeah’ Edmund replied, speaking earnestly. ‘Why does that shock you so much?’
‘Well I guess…um….’
‘Because I’m so wild?’ Edmund said raising an eyebrow. ‘Cocky? Confident? I know what I’m like. I know some people don’t like it, but I don’t care. I think you should be true to who you really are…’
Ashton listened to these words carefully, and something about what Edmund had said struck a chord with him. Ashton slowly widened his eyes, his heart beating deeply in his chest. Unfamiliar emotions began to swirl within the pit of his stomach.
‘I want to be married’ Edmund continued, ‘but the truth is…. well…. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little…unsure. I do have reservations but…you seem nice…. but um….’
‘No I understand’ Ashton cut in hastily, speaking quickly and with confidence. ‘I get it. This whole thing is out of our hands.’
‘I want to marry you’ Edmund said. ‘I just don’t know you.’
Ashton smiled then, letting out a slow sigh. His body relaxed a little more.
‘I want to make the most of life before I commit’ Edmund continued. ‘I don’t want to cheat or be dishonest…I’m sorry if you felt that I did anything wrong. You were kinda angry.’
Ashton swallowed nervously then, glancing away uncertainly.
‘Don’t worry’ Edmund said to him quickly, noticing his reaction. ‘I won’t ever ask you to give up your dancing. I know how much that means to you. And I will keep it a secret.’
‘Oh’ Ashton said, letting out a huge sigh of relief. ‘That’s…. that’s great.’
Edmund smirked at him.
‘You’re really weird’ he said.
‘I am?’ Ashton fumbled. ‘I don’t…I don’t mean to be.’
‘It’s ok’ Edmund smiled looking away at the horizon again, briefly before his sight returned to Ashton. ‘I think it’s kinda cute.’
Ashton flushed bright red at this. Unable to maintain Edmund’s gaze, he looked away.
Not sure of what he should say, he decided to say nothing, instead began to stare at his lap, his heart beating fast in his chest.

Edmund and Ashton spent the rest of that day together, and Ashton would often hurry after Edmund, struggling to keep up with him as he ran about, from one place to another.
Ashton thought to himself at one point, that Edmund was as excited as a humming bird, darting from here to there without tiring.
‘Where shall we go next?’ Edmund asked Ashton then, turning away from the pond.
They were in the park now, and Edmund had wanted to go and feed the ducks. But more than anything, he wanted to see the water.
‘I wish you had a river here’ Edmund mumbled.
‘Sorry…. we don’t have one of those’ Ashton mumbled.
‘Ok. So where shall we go next?’ Edmund asked again.
‘I…don’t know. Where would you like to go?’
‘Do you have a pool here in this city? I want to go swimming.’
‘A…. pool? Uh…. no. sorry.’
‘Aww man…that sucks.’
‘Why are you so interested in water?’ Ashton asked him then. ‘You’ve mentioned it a lot today.’

‘I love the water’ Edmund replied, a dreamy expression crossing his face, his eyes becoming distant. ‘I love to swim. I love the sound of water. You have your dancing…’ he turned back to Ashton then, ‘and I have my…. well….my home is close to the shore. I love to go out and be alone on the beach. It’s so tranquil, I can really escape from reality. And also, I love to look up at the sky at night when I am alone. I love to look at the stars’ He stopped suddenly, looking a little awkward as if he suddenly felt like he had said too much. ‘Tell me’ he hurried on, ‘how does dancing feel to you?’
‘Hm?’ Ashton blinked in surprise at this question. ‘How does it make me feel?’ Ashton fell silent for a moment, brow furrowed, frowning to himself as he thought about this. ‘Well, it makes me feel happy, more than anything else does in my life. Save for my sister’ he added with a smile. ‘I just…I can really feel myself. I’m sorry’ he added with a bashful chuckle, ‘I’m not really good at explaining. It just makes me feel strong and happy and myself. I love what I do, and I think I’m really good at it.’
‘You sure are’ Edmund smiled briefly, before looking away again. He spoke one more time. ‘You are close to your sister then?’
‘Very’ Ashton replied. ‘I love her very much.’
‘I’m an only child’ Edmund smiled back at him. ‘My parents would always spoil me.’
‘Oh.’
Edmund gave Ashton a strange expression then.
‘What?’ Ashton asked, feeling a little defensive all of a sudden.
‘You’re so awkward.’
‘I don’t mean to be’ Ashton mumbled.
‘It’s fine’ Edmund shrugged. ‘It’s just who you are. Hey I just thought of something’ he added in a lighter voice quickly after. ‘You know I could be wrong, but I have a feeling that we will get along really well.’
‘W-why do you say that?’
Edmund shot a sly grin towards him; Ashton felt his heart skip a beat.
‘Because they say opposites attract’ he answered. ‘And I don’t know how you feel but…I think I like you. Well, I mean I *do* like you’ he corrected himself, ‘but I think that there is potential to…...well.’ he trailed off. ‘You know…. let’s just see how it goes.’
‘We’re going to get married either way’ Ashton added hesitantly.
‘Don’t worry’ Edmund replied with confidence. ‘I’ll treat you right. I might be a little crazy at times,’ his eyes gleamed as he said this, ‘but hey…who isn’t? We all have our own ways.’

Ashton walked home alone that evening. Edmund had insisted on accompanying him, but Ashton persisted in saying that he was happy to go by himself, even that he preferred it on his own.
‘I just need time to think and be by myself’ he smiled at Edmund, averting his gaze as he said this. ‘I um…today has just been quite overwhelming for me.’
‘Oh, ok. I understand.’
‘Th-thanks’ Ashton mumbled. ‘Sorry.’
‘Oh no its ok’ Edmund reassured him, ‘I understand.’
‘Where are you staying?’
‘In a hotel.’
‘Where are your family? Were they not supposed to come here with you?’ Ashton asked.

‘I wanted to come alone’ Edmund said to him. ‘I…you know how you love your parents but sometimes you don’t…always want them around?’
Ashton thought back to his own parents.
‘Oh yeah’ Ashton nodded, frowning slightly, ‘I think I understand.’
‘I love my parents but they can be a little overbearing at times.’
‘Believe me I know how that feels’ Ashton laughed then, his voice natural and comfortable now. ‘My mum and dad are a little eccentric at the best of times.’
‘I think they seem fun.’
‘Trust me it gets old’ Ashton said in a flat voice.
‘Oh ok. Well at least they seem to like me.’
‘Yeah they do.’
‘Let’s exchange numbers’ Edmund spoke up, catching Ashton a little off-guard.
‘What? Oh…. uh…. sure.’
He brought out his mobile, and Edmund did the same.
They exchanged numbers.
‘Great, now we can text each other’ Edmund grinned. ‘Oh look you got a message!’
Ashton stared down at his screen.
Edmund had sent him a message. It was a smiley face. There was nothing else in the message.
‘Aww thanks’ Ashton chuckled.
Edmund put his phone away.
‘I’ll see you tomorrow maybe?’ Edmund asked him.
‘Sure. Um…did you want me to walk to your hotel?’
‘No thanks’ Edmund winked. ‘I’m going to take in the sights of the city a little more. I think it will look really nice at night.’
‘Well just be careful then.’
‘You too’ Edmund waved at him, taking a step back. ‘Wait’ he called out suddenly, as Ashton began to turn.
‘What is it?’
‘Can I…..kiss you?’
‘Hm?’ Ashton’s heart skipped a little, his palms began to sweat a little with nerves. ‘Yes’ he replied, turning fully back to face Edmund.
Edmund smiled, letting out a slow sigh.
He stepped forwards then, cupping Ashton’s face gently, as Ashton closed his eyes.
Ashton felt Edmund’s lips upon his, his kiss was gentle.
Edmund backed away, pulling his hands slowly back.
‘I’ll see you tomorrow Ashton.’
And without another word, he turned and walked away.
Ashton stared after him, watching until he was out of sight, before he turned away also, heading to his home.
He felt so exhausted, physically and mentally.
He just wanted to sleep.

Ashton stepped into the entrance hall of his home a short time later, only to find the place utterly dark, and seemingly completely deserted.

Ashton swallowed the lump that had caught in his throat, grimacing slightly and glancing cautiously about as he tried his hardest not to think of all the scary movies he had seen in his life.
He took a deep breath, trying to find strength within him. He had thought it was odd when he saw his home from the outside, noticing that there were no lights visible. But he hadn't put too much thought towards this, assuming that the maids had just closed all the heavy curtains within the manor.
But upon entering, he found this not to be the case.
'Hello?' Ashton spoke, hearing the sound of his own voice echo back to him.
He took another calming breath, trying to clear his mind from unpleasant thoughts.
He took a step forwards, painfully aware of the echoing of his footsteps within the large entrance hall.
Ashton moved to the next room, and the room after that. He came to the base of a set of stairs, pausing and glancing up. He narrowed his eyes then, his attention fixed on a certain point, positive he saw a shape in the dark, a pale looming figure. A human sort of shape.
Ashton was too perplexed to react when its head tilted forwards, falling off completely from its shoulders, bouncing down the stairs, spinning in a circle before coming to a stop below him, bumping into the side of his foot gently.
Ashton blinked, his brain not processing what he was seeing, he was unable to react to this, and only stared down dumbfounded as he realised suddenly, that it was a human skull.
Ashton blinked again, frozen.
Time seemed to stop.
Everything seemed to become, out of place, out of this world, too quiet, somehow separated from reality.
He turned around then, seeing two figures that had been stalking up behind him just standing there now. One held a glowing orb within its grasp, lighting up the features of both figures.
Pale skin and sunken eyes and-
Ashton was unable to process anything else before letting out a bloodcurdling shriek, stumbling backwards and trembling violently. His mind was a blur of raw panic, feeling only primal terror, a need to escape and survive, a feeling known best by his ancestors when they lived in the wilds, who would run for their lives from death every day.
'Oh my baby' one of the figures cooed.
Ashton only managed to let out a small squeak at this, suddenly move confused than terrified.
The smaller figure before him, a woman by her voice, and looking at her more attentively now, pulled back the veil from her face, kneeling before him and putting the glowing orb on the floor.
'I'm sorry my sweet child' the woman said, 'I didn't mean to terrify you. We only wanted to frighten you a little bit!'
'Mum!' Ashton cried out then, incredulous. 'Dad?!'
His father who was standing behind his mother now, as she fussed and worried over him, was giving out his loud and booming bark of a laugh, the sound reverberating around the halls.
'W-what are you doing?' Ashton gasped.
His mother rose to her feet then, joining her husbands' side as he began to apologise to Ashton profusely.
'We promise we won't do that again; we promise it was only a one-time thing, we promise' Isaac was rambling.

He quickly fell silent when Maya extended her arms out dramatically, throwing her head to the side and arching her back.
'We're ghouls!' she cried in glee.
Ashton narrowed his eyes at them then, noticing their dark clothes, their pale painted faces, the fake blood around their lips and hollow-painted eyes.
Ashton's heart finally began to calm, and he let out a deep and heavy sigh, bowing his head before calmly rising to his feet.
'That was awful' he uttered. 'I could have had a heart attack and died.'
'Do you know what is utterly terrifying?' his mother spoke over him then, doing so with much excitement.
'Um…. n-no?' Ashton rolled his eyes, letting out a groan. 'Do I want to know?'
'What's going on down there?' a voice called out suddenly, and Ashton recognised his sisters voice.
She stood at the top of the stairs now by the wall, turning the dial that controlled the light. The hall lit up now in only a dim glow. Beside her was the now headless mannequin that had scared him so much.
'Ashton did they scare you?' Alicia scowled in displeasure.
'We were just going to show him the rabbits' Maya beamed.
'Rabbits?' Ashton repeated.
Above them Alicia groaned loudly, turning away and heading back down the hall.
'I'm tired, I'm going back to my room. It's too late for this nonsense.'
She disappeared from sight, and several maids appeared around Ashton and his parents, beginning to clean. Ashton noticed then fake blood was pooled on the floor here and there, and some pieces of furniture had somehow been damaged and scratched. Almost like in a horror movie or something.
'Come come come' Maya said gleefully, pulling Ashton along as Isaac led the way. 'We must show you the bunnies!'
Ashton groaned again, louder this time, wanting only to be left alone, wanting only to rest. But he knew he would not be able to get away from his parents so easily, he knew they would not leave him alone until they had shown him what they wanted.
Ashton had no idea what to expect, his mother had said 'bunnies', but that could have meant literally anything to his mother.
Ashton was actually surprised when they brought him to one of the quieter rooms on the other side of the manor, and he saw…...actual rabbits there.
The room was mostly empty, small and rarely visited. It was just a storage room, with a few boxes and some unused furniture.
In the very middle of the room was a large plastic box, the lid on the floor nearby. Glancing into the box Ashton saw, two balls of pure white fluff.
Maya bent down the pick up on of the bunnies, while Isaac picked up the other. They both began to fuss and coo over them. The bunnies seemed very tame, completely relaxed at being held, their jaws continued to work as they nibbled on….
'What are they eating?' Ashton asked them, slight concern laced within his words. 'Are they bleeding?'
'They are vampire bunnies' Maya told him with a cruel gleam. 'Be careful, if you come too close, they will bite your face off!'
'Seriously' Ashton asked. 'What is that?'

‘Don’t mind your mother’ Isaac harrumphed. ‘She likes to be slightly more dramatic than I am.’
‘What?’ Ashton sighed tiredly.
‘Look’ Isaac said, indicating the bowl the bunnies had been eating from that sat within the plastic box. ‘They’re just eating strawberries.’
‘They do like to make a mess though don’t they?’ Maya giggled childishly, snuggling into the one she held. ‘Precious babies. They do look terrifying, don’t they just?’ she added, ‘covered in blood I mean.’
‘You mean strawberry juice?’ Ashton replied flatly.
‘No its blood.’
‘Anyway’ Ashton mumbled, turning away from them, ‘I’m going to bed.’
‘How did your date with Edmund go?’ his mother asked cheerily before Ashton could make his escape.
‘It went really well’ Ashton replied with an awkward smile. ‘He’s a little intimidating…’
‘Intimidating?’
‘No, maybe that’s not the right word’ Ashton quickly corrected himself. ‘A little um…. intense?’
‘Well he’s certainly fun, isn’t he?’ Maya beamed.
‘Yeah sure’ Ashton mumbled. ‘Anyway. Goodnight.’
He scuttled off before they had a chance to stop him, heading swiftly to his soft and inviting bed, somehow feeling more exhausted than he had before.

Chapter Eleven

Ashton woke late the next morning. He felt a touch at his shoulder, felt his body being given a light shake.
He groaned, opening his eyes and blinking wearily up to see Alicia standing over him, a great smile upon her face.
‘Finally,’ she sighed, straightening up. ‘You were completely gone for a moment there.’
‘Gone?’ Ashton mumbled.
‘You were sleeping so heavily I thought you were in a coma.’
Ashton groaned again, turning over in bed to face the other way. Beneath the sheets he was shirtless, it had been a warm night, and the blanket draped over his body was only a thin one.
Alicia leaned over him again, arms held playfully out either side of her, eyes roving over his body.
She reached a finger out, prodding him firmly on the shoulder, right in the middle of the bruise.
‘Ow!’ Ashton protested, ‘why would you…. what are you doing?’
‘I’m trying to wake you up’ Alicia replied sweetly, straightening again and standing with her hands behind her back.
‘Why when I’m so vulnerable?’ Ashton uttered, sounding so weak and feeble. ‘My body is still healing…still sore.’
‘You’re strong enough to keep on dancing.’

Ashton shot her a scowl then, not wishing to argue further, not wishing to allow himself to spiral into a discussion.
'Come on' Alicia prompted, 'we're waiting for you at breakfast. Mum and Dad want us to eat together.'
'Why?' Ashton groaned into his pillow.
'Mum said something about wanting to spend as much time together as a family as possible before you're taken away.'
'Taken away by who?' Ashton spoke, words muffled by his pillow.
'By your husband to be' Alicia smirked.
'Mum was always so dramatic. Tell her she's being silly.'
'In any case' Alicia went on, grabbing the sheets and trying to tug them away, but Ashton had already gripped them tightly in his fist. 'You have to get up, we're waiting for you.'
'Mmmm…. five more minutes.'
Alicia let go of the sheets with a sigh, frowning down at him. 'Fine, but you had better be awake by the time I come back.'
'Mmmm.'
Alicia tutted at him then, before turning away.
She left the room, only to come back around ten minutes later.
Upon opening the door she froze, hand still on the handle, eyes wide in surprise.
A figure knelt beside the bed, appearing to watch Ashton sleep.
Edmund turned at the sound of the door opening, smiling at Alicia before lifting a finger to his lips and winking at her.
Alicia stared at him before for a moment, caught off-guard, before returning an awkward smile and dipping her head.
She stepped out of the room, closing the door quietly after her.

Edmund turned back to Ashton, who was still fast asleep.
He smiled widely to himself, excited and amused. He folded his arms, leaning on the edge of the bed and watching Ashton, eyes bright and playful.
Ashton slept peacefully, breathing slowly and deeply. In and out, in, and out.
Edmund pursed his lips to stop himself from giggling, forcing himself to be calm.
He blew lightly on Ashton's face then.
Ashton wrinkled his nose in his sleep, frowning at the sensation, his hand lifting towards his face, making an action as if to wave away whatever was bothering him.
Edmund leant back then, trying to stifle laughter.
He leant forwards again, taking a small piece of Ashton's hair, using it to tickle the inside of his ear.
Ashton swatted at the air, trying to get away whatever was agitating him.
Edmund couldn't help but let out a small giggle, before controlling himself again and reaching out to Ashton once more. Stroking the end of his nose ever so lightly, making Ashton's skin tickle.
Ashton opened his eyes then, only half at first, and then fully as he saw Edmund there.
'Morning sleepy head' Edmund grinned.
Ashton stared wide-eyed back for a few moments, before sitting up in bed.
'What are you doing here?'
'I came to see my husband to be' Edmund replied quickly.

He smiled widely up at Ashton, still kneeling beside the bed, arms still folded on the sheets.
‘Why are you in my room….? And why are you sneaking into my house?’
‘Oh, come on its not the first time I’ve done it’ Edmund grinned cheekily up at him, seemingly very pleased with himself, like he thought he was being incredibly clever or something. ‘Oh, and your family is apparently waiting for you to join them for breakfast.’
‘Um…. what about you?’ Ashton asked uncertainly.
‘What do you mean?’ Edmund asked him innocently.
‘Have you not had breakfast?’
‘Of course not! I wanted to wait for you.’
‘…….’
Edmund continued to grin back joyfully.
‘……’
Edmund rested his chin on his palm then, sighing dreamily and gazing up at Ashton with deep eyes.
‘……’
‘So, should we go for breakfast?’ Edmund finally broke the silence.
‘Oh! Yeah’ Ashton fumbled, going a little red.
Edmund laughed at his awkwardness.
‘Ok cool! I’ll wait.’
‘Can you…. turn around so I can change?’
‘Aww, are you shy?’ Edmund replied, speaking in a teasing manner now, cocking his head, eyebrows raised.
‘No, I just…. I mean yes.’
‘But we’re going to be married’ Edmund reminded him.
‘But…...uh….’
‘It’s alright I’m only teasing’ Edmund chuckled, rising to his feet and turning away. ‘I’ll be waiting outside your door. And hurry up. I’m starving.’

Ashton stepped out into the hall once he was ready.
‘You look nice’ Edmund winked at him, eyeing him up and down.
‘Oh. Um, thanks’ Ashton replied awkwardly, feeling a little conspicuous.
‘No problem’ Edmund grinned back. ‘It is my absolute pleasure.’
Ashton blinked at this, wondering briefly if Edmund was perhaps teasing him.
‘Um. Ok.’
‘Wait, do you have your own bathroom in there?’ Edmund frowned thoughtfully then.
‘Uh. Yeah. Why?’
‘I was wondering what that other door was’ Edmund glanced around. ‘Cool. I wish I had one of those. I have to go down the hall to go to the bathroom. Inconvenient hu?’
‘Uh. Sure.’
‘You’ll see my home sometime’ Edmund said to him. ‘May I hold your hand?’
Ashton felt his heart skip a beat, felt the sensation of butterflies fluttering in his stomach.
Ashton hunched his shoulders, grasping his hands over his chest, before lifting his head, smiling at Edmund briefly and extending his hand.
Edmund took Ashton’s hand carefully, smiling at him.
‘Let’s go then’ Edmund said, ‘you must be pretty hungry too hu?’

‘Yeah, I am a little I guess’ Ashton smiled, ‘I was uh…. well it was just a long day yesterday. I didn’t realise I was so exhausted.’
‘Oh, I see’ Edmund grinned. ‘Are you saying I wore you out?’
‘W-what?’
Edmund laughed at him then, turning away.
‘Relax’ Edmund said, ‘I’m just joking.’
‘Don’t please’ Ashton spoke in a quiet voice.
‘Oh calm down’ Edmund waved him away as they walked down the hallway hand in hand, heading for the stairs. ‘You need to lighten up a little.’
Ashton felt a little uncertain about this, suddenly doubting himself.
‘Am I…’ he spoke up hesitantly, ‘highly strung?’
‘Not at all’ Edmund replied. ‘I like you just the way you are.’
Ashton flushed a little at this, suddenly feeling very self-conscious, worrying that he was beginning to sweat.
They walked down the stairs together. Edmund seemed to already know where the breakfast hall was, and he and Ashton met his family there.
‘Oh waw!’ Maya exclaimed upon seeing them. She cried out in excitement, eyes lighting up. ‘It’s so wonderful to see you both’ she said rising from her seat and gliding over towards them.
Ashton expected her to greet them both, instead she put herself between the two, breaking them up. Edmund’s hand slipped free from Ashton’s. Maya grasped Edmund’s shoulders and steered him towards the table, pushing him downwards into one of the seats.
Edmund said nothing, but looked a little flabbergasted. Ashton only stood by the door, looking a little lost and confused.
From the table, Alicia and Isaac who had been sitting and waiting patiently for them, both smiled at him, Isaac lifted his hand and waved jovially at Ashton, who waved awkwardly back.
Ashton glanced back to his mother who was gliding towards him again. She had something in her hand now, and Edmund glanced around back to him, eyes wide to see what Maya would do.
‘I have a present for you my dear son’ Maya said to him, handing him a book.
Ashton blinked down in confusion at the cover as she held it out to him, he read the title.
‘A cookbook?’ he said in a flat voice. ‘Seriously?’
‘Oh come on’ Maya said, giggling at her own genius mind, or so the thought it was. ‘I just *know* you would make a wonderful housewife. Besides I know you love to read.’
‘I like to read *novels’* Ashton flushed indignantly, turning scarlet. ‘And *housewife*?! Mum please just stop.’
Sitting at the table, Edmund shot him a sly grin as Isaac began to chuckle heartily, while Alicia on the other hand, looked only exasperated and fed up.
‘Leave him alone mother’ Alicia said to her flatly. ‘Can’t you see you’re bothering him?’
Maya paid Alicia no attention, instead hugged Ashton tightly, kissing him aggressively and almost suffocating him as she held him too tightly.
‘Mum’ Ashton groaned. ‘I can’t breathe!’
She let go of him quickly, causing Ashton to hunch over, rubbing the sore parts of his body then.
‘Oh my gosh my baby I'm sorry! I forgot you were injured! I’m sorry what a terrible mother, how dreadful of me!’

‘It’s ok’ Ashton grinned, flinching slightly as he straightened up, rubbing his body tenderly, feeling his bruises there. ‘Oh please don’t cry’ he sighed to his mother, seeing her eyes welling up in tears. ‘It was an accident, you just forgot.’
‘A mother should never hurt her baby!’
Ashton just sighed, rolling his eyes and making his way forwards, taking the seat beside Edmund.
Edmund tilted his head towards Ashton then, glancing at the book he held in his hand.
‘Hm’ Edmund said.
‘Come sit down mum’ Ashton said to Maya, as Edmund took the cookbook lightly from his grasp, beginning to flick through it.
Maya dabbed the tears away from her eyes, turning back to the table and sitting back in her seat.
She seemed to have recovered now, beaming over at him.
Beside her, Isaac reached out to her, taking her hand in his own large one.
She looked over to him, gazing at him lovingly.
Alicia was ignoring them both, continuing to eat her breakfast.
Edmund was flicking through the cookbook, and Ashton sighed, resting his chin on his palm and gazing at his parents.
How they loved each other so dearly. Nothing had changed since the day they had met. At least that is what he had come to learn.
Ashton glanced towards Edmund sitting beside him, but Edmund was engrossed in the cookbook.
Ashton wondered then.
Can Edmund and I truly fall in love?

Afterwards, Edmund and Ashton went upstairs, heading back to Ashton’s room in an attempt to get a bit of privacy.
‘That was a lovely breakfast.’
‘Yeah’ Ashton replied, ‘we have really good cooks.’
‘That’s nice.’
‘Yeah.’
‘Your parents are really nice’ Edmund said. ‘I think they like me.’
‘I think they like you too.’
Ashton paused suddenly, glancing behind them and groaning as he saw a figure slip back around the corner and out of view. But he had already seen her clearly.
‘Mother what are you doing?’ Ashton droned.
Edmund glanced around then, wearing a curious expression.
‘Oh look, we’ve got company’ he declared happily as Maya stepped out from around the corner, closely followed by Isaac.
They were both dressed as ballerinas. Ashton didn’t bother to ask why.
‘I was just wondering if you would notice’ Maya spoke up sweetly, holding her hands together before her.
‘Why are you following us?’ Ashton asked in a deadpan voice, eyes glazed over.
I was just wondering if you would notice our bunnies?’ Maya said to him.

‘Hm?’ Ashton frowned. ‘You mean the ones you showed me before? I saw them already.’
‘I mean we have way more than that’ Maya said, bouncing on the spot enthusiastically.
Ashton stared at his mother with uncertainty for a few moments, before glancing to the side, noticing that Edmund was staring at something out of the window beside them.
They were on the second floor, and could see most of the garden from this window.
And Ashton suddenly noticed, below them in the garden, not too far away from the manor, was a large pen, the size of a field, and it was filled with white rabbits.
‘What the….?’ Ashton managed to utter. ‘What did you do?’ he asked his mum, who was beginning to gleam excitedly to herself.
‘Oh my dear, don’t say it like it’s a bad thing, you should be happier!’
‘Why?’
‘Because look at how cute they are!’ Maya gushed, hand going to her face as she failed to supress her sniggers. ‘How could you be mad or sad or having a bad day when you see such cute little bunnies?’
Behind her Isaac was grinning wordlessly. Ashton glanced at him for a moment and saw. But Isaac was not looking at him or anyone else, instead he was staring at Maya, watching her from behind. There was love and adoration in his eyes.
Ashton looked away and back to his mum.
‘What are you talking about?’ Ashton said to her.
‘Woah’ Edmund voice up, narrowing his eyes as he gazed out the window. ‘There must be like fifty of them.’
‘Actually, there’s a hundred and twelve’ Maya declared, stepping forwards.
Ashton stared at his mum, she stared back, smiling silently, waiting for him to question her.
But he didn’t, Ashton decided he did not have the energy and was in no mood to ask her these questions. His parents just did strange things. There was no rhyme or reason. They just did things. (Most of the time strange)
Edmund was the one to ask.
‘Why do you have them?’ he raised an eyebrow to Maya.
Maya’s expression broke into an excited and dramatic face as she gasped loudly, eyes shining as she clasped her hands over her chest. ‘That’s a very good question, and I’m so glad you asked!’ she told him. ‘Well. There was a fur farm some distance from here. There’s been some controversy surrounding it for quite some time’ Maya said waving a finger at him. ‘Isaac and I have been working on getting it closed for what felt like forever! But we finally managed to do it. Of course, we volunteered to take all the bunnies. We weren’t going to leave them. No way!’
‘Why didn’t you tell me about this?’ Ashton asked her flatly.
‘What? And ruin the surprise!? Are you kidding me?’ Maya cried out.
‘What are you going to do with them?’ Ashton frowned. ‘You know how rabbits breed. There will be thousands in no time.’
‘They’re all spayed and neutered’ Maya pouted at him, hands upon her hips. ‘Do you really think we’re irresponsible people?’
She sounded so indignant.
‘Anyway’ Ashton said, turning away and grasping Edmunds sleeve.
Edmund gave an expression of surprise at this, but said nothing.
‘We need a bit of peace and quiet’ Ashton said, speaking to both of his parents, but mostly his mum. ‘You know this is an important time for us.’

‘Oh yes of course’ Maya squealed childishly. ‘You two have fun! But not too much fun! Not yet anyway’ she giggled heartily at that as if she had just told a hilarious joke.
Ashton turned and hurried down the corridor, dragging Edmund with him, face flushed with embarrassment as he ran.
Isaac and Maya waving at them as they went.

Ashton reached his bedroom, opening the door and rushing in before letting go of Edmund’s sleeve. He turned back towards the door, leaning out into the hallway and glancing either side before retreating into his room, snapping the door shut.
‘Thank god, I thought we might have been followed.’
Ashton looked back at Edmund then, who stood silently smiling at him.
It was at that moment Ashton suddenly realised with shock, that he was alone with Edmund.
‘N-now…don’t get any ideas’ Ashton fumbled, shoulders hunched.
Edmund frowned at him for a moment, before letting out a hearty laugh.
‘Don’t you trust me? I’m wounded.’
‘No it’s not like that!’ Ashton panicked. ‘It’s just that I don’t know you yet. So, I can’t trust you.’
‘It’s ok’ Edmund said to him, taking a step back and folding his arms. ‘I understand.’ He flicked his hair back then, almost teasingly. ‘So what do you want to do?’
Ashton pursed his lips, glancing downwards.
‘What’s wrong?’ Edmund questioned.
Ashton looked up again, smiling warmly now.
‘It’s nothing. It’s just…this whole thing is so overwhelming. I’ve never been in a situation like this before.’
‘I should think not’ Edmund spoke firmly in mock annoyance. ‘You need to relax.’
‘I didn’t…. sorry’ Ashton blushed slightly.
Edmund shrugged, glancing away and shaking his head.
‘Should we go out somewhere then?’ Edmund asked him. ‘I want to see more of the city.’
‘I guess.’
‘What’s wrong?’ Edmund asked again.
Ashton did not speak for a time, but instead, continued to stare at the floor.
‘You can tell me’ Edmund prompted.
‘What’s going to happen after we are married?’
‘What do you mean?’
‘Well…. how will things change?’ Ashton said.
‘How did they change for your sister?’
Ashton raised his head again, meeting Edmund’s gaze as he stared blankly at him.
‘She…. moved away to live with her husband. Oh no, will I have to leave home as well?’
‘I never actually thought about that’ Edmund mused, scratching his chin and staring towards the ceiling. ‘Well I suppose we all have to leave home eventually; we all have to leave our parents to start lives of our own. Your sister, moved to live with her husband because that’s tradition, its expected, for the wife to move to the husband. But in our case…...I guess it could go either way. Hey you never know; I might be able to live here with you until we get a place of our own. Won’t that be fun?’
‘I hope you don’t mind leaving your parents’ Ashton said to him, feeling suddenly guilty. ‘I um…will certainly miss mine when I do…. finally grow up.’

‘Hm?’
Edmund cocked his head at Ashton, it looked as if he were about to say something, when suddenly his eyes lit up.
‘Oh, I just realised!’ he said. ‘Mum and dad will be coming here, dam I forgot to tell you.’
‘Your parents are coming *here*?’
‘Yeah! I was so distracted with um…. you to be honest…’ Edmund averted his gaze at that, looking a little awkward. It was odd for Ashton to see Edmund bashful like this. ‘I’m sorry I forgot to tell you; it completely slipped my mind.’
‘Why didn’t mum and dad say anything?’ Ashton mumbled to himself.
‘Aww come on don’t feel bad’ Edmund said, moving towards Ashton and closer towards the door. ‘I’m sure they were meant to tell you. They were probably both distracted with their millions of rabbits. I always loved getting new pets as a kid, I guess I can imagine how excited they must be about it.’
‘Are you saying they forgot me over rabbits?’ Ashton asked then, heart dampening.
‘Oh, come on don’t be a sourpuss’ Edmund teased, flicking Ashton playfully in the middle of his forehead to bring him out of his daze. ‘My parents should be here by now.’ Edmund pulled the door open, turning back towards Ashton, giving him a wink and a smile. ‘You ready to meet them?’
Ashton felt suddenly terrified, his heart twisting in his chest. He felt like he was falling into a chasm. But he tried his best to put on a brave face, and to feign confidence, even though he felt none at all. His legs suddenly felt like jelly.
‘Yeah I’m ready’ Ashton replied brightly.
‘That’s more like it!’
Edmund held out his hand then for Ashton to take. ‘Do you want to hold hands? Or is that a little much?’
‘Um’ Ashton swallowed nervously, before mentally gathering himself. ‘Yes’ he said before he could allow his mind to stumble upon itself. ‘That would be nice.’
He took Edmund’s hand, feeling a little lighter now.
Edmund he could tell was happy for this.
‘Let’s go’ Edmund said, leading the way out of the room, allowing the door to swing gently shut behind them.
‘I just want to ask you something’ Ashton voiced as they walked down the corridor. ‘How did you feel when you first met my parents. I mean…were you nervous at all?’
‘Not in the slightest’ Edmund replied without a pause. ‘I’m not a baby like you.’
‘Hu?’
‘Relax I’m just teasing. You really need to lighten up.’
‘I'm sorry’ Ashton chuckled lightly. ‘I’ll try to not take things too seriously.’

Chapter Twelve

They walked hand in hand through the manor, heading downstairs. Ashton felt a little terrified, painfully aware of everything around him.

Edmund on the other hand, was completely calm, Ashton began to feel a little paranoid then, worrying if his palms were sweating.
Oh no what if he notices? Am I grossing him out? Maybe he doesn't want to hold my hand. Should I say something? Should I say nothing? What is he thinking?
'Oh, I hear voices' Edmund said.
Ashton paused, tilting his head a little to the side.
He indeed heard voices, a woman's voice, one that he did not recognise.
'That sounds like mum' Edmund grinned.
He made his way down the stairs, pulling Ashton along with him.
'Hey…w-wait' Ashton mumbled, feeling suddenly terrified as he was dragged along.
'Come on let's go' Edmund spoke eagerly back to Ashton, ignoring his protests. 'I want you to meet my parents.'
Ashton dug his heels in suddenly, pulling back.
Edmund was jerked to a stop, still holding his hand. He looked back to see Ashton a few steps behind him on the stairs, staring down at him frozen, body tense.
'Don't be so scared' Edmund spoke calmly to him, his eyes turning gentle. 'I promise you they're both nice.'
'No, it's not that' Ashton uttered.
'Look, just don't think about it' Edmund said to him, pulling Ashton towards him carefully, encouraging him to move.
Ashton took another step down.
'Don't think about it' Edmund said to him again. 'Everything is going to be fine. I promise. I'll look after you.'
Ashton said nothing, taking another step forwards as he pursed his lips, swallowing the lump in his throat.
He felt a little better at least for having Edmund there with him.
Edmund continued to walk, leading the way and guiding Ashton along.
Ashton breathed a slow and steady breath, willing his nerves to settle, but his stomach still felt in knots.

They reached the bottom of the stairs, and Ashton could hear the voices clearer. His mother was talking now, she sounded happy as she usually did. And then he heard two unfamiliar voices. These he guessed must have been Edmund's parents.
Edmund glanced back at Ashton with a grin, just one last time to check up on him, still holding his hand.
'You ok?' he asked.
Ashton couldn't answer, his throat feeling suddenly very dry. So instead he nodded energetically.
This seemed to satisfy Edmund, and he faced ahead again.
Edmund let go of his hand just as they reached the open doorway. Within the room just through the open door, Ashton could hear the voices continuing to talk. It seemed their parents were making plans for the wedding.
Edmund winked at Ashton, putting his finger to his lips and smiling at him.

‘After you?’ he offered. ‘It is *your* house.’
Ashton was caught a little off-guard by this, suddenly realising that the voices in the room ahead of them had fallen silent.
They had heard Edmund speak.
He resigned himself, making his way forward, making sure to hold his head high.
Ashton stepped around the corner and into sight, smiling with feigned confidence as he stood beside the table his parents sat at. Sitting opposite the table from his parents, were Edmund’s parents.
Nothing particularly stood out about them. They were both handsome people, both well dressed, like his own parents, but unlike his own parents, they looked a little more serious, a little more professional. Even when they were trying to be serious, Isaac and Maya looked still a little comical, smiling a little too hard, eyes a little too wide, facial expressions a little stiff. Ashton knew they were both trying hard to be sensible in front of company, especially of this kind, especially the first meeting. It was said that you could only make a good first impression once.
‘Well hello dear’ the young lady Ashton guessed to be Edmund’s mother said to him. ‘You must be Ashton Lucius Miles if I presume correctly.’
Ashton stared at the lady for a few moments, his mind drawing up a blank until his mother spoke to him.
‘Ashton’ Maya spoke firmly, brow furrowed as she gave him a stern look. ‘You’ve just been spoken to.’
Ashton suddenly snapped back to reality, realising himself.
‘I’m so sorry’ Ashton spoke formally now, standing a little straighter and putting his shoulders back as was expected. ‘It’s a pleasure to finally meet you Alannah. Sorry’ he said again, smiling a little bashfully, ‘I feel a little caught off-guard I’m afraid.’
‘That’s to be expected’ Alannah smiled. ‘I hope this isn’t all too overwhelming for you.’
‘Well it is a little daunting’ Ashton replied, ‘but I’m excited.’
He felt something touch his hand then, glancing back he saw that it was Edmund, weaving his fingers between Ashton’s. He gave Ashton’s hand a light squeeze in encouragement, giving him the tiniest nod before letting go again and looking towards his parents.
Maya was about to say something, drawing a deep breath, eyes wide with excitement as she was about to blurt out who knows what? But Isaac sitting beside her placed a hand gently on her shoulder, calming and controlling her. Maya closed her mouth then, simply smiling silently.
Ashton let out an internal sigh of relief. His mother could get a little too excited at times. But his father was always there to reel her in if she got a little wild. He could tell that she was a little on edge, trying her best to behave. It wasn’t easy for her, and although to others she appeared utterly calm, Ashton was familiar with this façade. She was very different when she was truly relaxed.
‘We are both very excited to see Ashton finally married’ Isaac said. ‘His preference…. well it’s a little different.’
‘Yes well’ Alannah nodded at that, ‘my son has always been a wild thing’ she said, casting a disapproving frown over at Edmund, who only smiled cheekily back, unperturbed. ‘I’m hoping maybe a commitment like this will calm him down a little and get him to think somewhat more rationally. He still thinks he’s a child at times. He’s caused me trouble all his life, even as a baby. And then he told me he was gay….’
‘Not that there is anything wrong with that’ Edmund’s father voiced.

‘No of course’ Alannah hastily corrected herself. ‘I’m sorry if that implied the wrong thing, it’s just that I had plans for him to marry this lovely girl, and he ruined it for me.’
‘I completely understand his point of view’ Isaac confessed, glancing towards his wife lovingly and taking her hand in his. ‘You see, I was supposed to marry another. My mother had everything planned but…I had other ideas. When I first saw Maya from across a room it was love at first sight. We instantly bonded and…well…’ Isaac broke off momentarily, seemingly becoming lost in thought. He and Maya were gazing at one another now, leaning closer together, simply melting in adoration for each other. ‘I knew I had to be with her’ Isaac spoke in a dreamy and distant voice. ‘I simply had to have my way, regardless of how others thought and felt. My mother was not pleased to say the least.’
‘And I can completely understand her feelings if you went against everything she had planned for you’ Alannah replied, eyebrow twitching slightly as she spoke. ‘It’s not easy to find a suitable bride. You must have caused quite a hassle for your poor mother.’
‘Oh mother’ Edmund laughed at her. ‘You’ll never let that go, will you?’
Alannah glared at her son angrily, but Ashton saw something else there in her expression, as faint as it was.
It was amusement.
‘Stop being so sour mother’ Edmund said, sauntering up to the table and giving her a kiss on the cheek. ‘You look so much better when you smile.’
‘I may smile a little more if you were less worrying for me’ Alannah replied flatly, staring at the ceiling.
‘Oh, come on mother’ Edmund said in a teasing voice, wrapping his arms around her then and pressing his cheek against hers playfully. ‘Being a parent wouldn’t be anywhere near as fun without the challenge.’
‘Just you wait’ Alannah said to him. ‘I look forward to the day I can say *I told you so*.’
‘I will do everything in my power to prevent that’ Edmund said straightening up as he let go of his mother. ‘I’d be a great dad. But forget about that, we haven’t even gotten married yet’ he said reaching out for Ashton and pulling him closer into a tight hug, causing Ashton to stumble, cheeks flushed a little in embarrassment. ‘I think you’re jumping the gun a little bit mother.’
Ashton said nothing. Just stood there looking terrified.
Alastair, Edmund’s father who sat beside Alannah, spoke up for the first time since Edmund and Ashton arrived.
‘I was also hoping, that some responsibility would calm our son’ Edmund’s father added in a sombre tone. ‘I for one am tired of his antics.’
‘Liar’ Edmund chipped in.
‘Anyway’ Alastair continued, turning to look at Ashton then, ‘I apologise for Edmund. He’s never had much responsibility.’
‘Th-that’s ok’ Ashton hunched his shoulders, feeling very hot. ‘I d-don’t mind.’
‘It’s nice to meet you by the way Ashton’ Alastair smiled.
‘It’s nice to meet you too Alastair’ Ashton replied, trying to shuffle out of Edmund’s hold.
‘Oh no, I just had a terrible thought’ Alannah voiced then, looking genuinely concerned. ‘What if Edmund is a bad influence on your son?’ she said to Isaac and Maya.
‘Oh don’t worry’ Maya waved her words away with a gleam. ‘Ashton has always been true to himself. He’s always been good. He won’t pick up any bad habits. I know.’
‘I’m glad you have so much trust in him’ Alannah said to Maya. ‘I think it’s a wonderful thing.’

Alannah cast a glance back towards Edmund then for a brief instant, reaching out to squeeze his hand before drawing back again, smiling at him quickly.
'You two should probably go' Isaac said to Edmund and Ashton. 'We are still going over the details of the wedding.'
'Wait, shouldn't we stay for that?' Ashton asked.
'You could but it will be really boring' Isaac said to him. 'We'll tell you the important parts later over dinner.'
'Sure' Ashton nodded. 'Ok. If that works.'
'We'll talk to you both later' Maya grinned at them, 'you two have fun.'
'Will do' Edmund replied at that. 'Let's go Ashton.'
Edmund led the way out of the room, Ashton trailing after him, his attention on his and Edmund's parents lingered there for a moment as they continued their discussion. It seemed to be going well, and all of them seemed very pleased, nodding and smiling and making eye-contact. It seemed to be going very well.
Ashton looked away, following Edmund into the hallway.

Ashton and Edmund walked side by side down the hallway, heading in no particular direction.
'So, what should we do?' Edmund asked him cheerily. '…. Ashton?'
He turned to him, a sudden look of concern on his face.
'Are you alright?'
'I'm sorry' Ashton gasped, tears prickling in his eyes. 'This is all so overwhelming for me. I wonder if this is how Alicia felt when she was engaged and soon to be married.'
'What?'
'I'm sorry' Ashton said again, feeling suddenly short of breath. 'I…. have to go. I need to be alone.'
'Hey wait!'
Edmund called after him, but Ashton ignored his words, running off down the hall without looking back, trying his best to keep himself together, to keep himself in control.
It took everything within him to do so.
Edmund did not try to pursue him, and for this, Ashton was extremely grateful.
He left the grounds of his manor home, slipping through one of the smaller gates at the edge of the garden and entering the city.
He kept his head down, avoiding the gaze of the people around him. Though he knew some of them would be staring, they always did because of the way he stood out.
They knew who he was, he stood out from the others because of his rich clothes. This still bothered Ashton, even years later, from the day he first ventured from his home when he was younger.
Ashton walked without pause now, his footsteps determined. He headed to the one place he felt safest in the times when he was stressed or unhappy, the one place he could go to seek solace when his sister was not around to comfort him.
And that was the dancing studio.
It would be closed now, his dancing teacher Michelle would most likely be home with her daughters. His friend Lucile, whom he would practice with often, would likely be busy too.
Ashton did not want to bother him, though it occurred to him at that moment, that he had not messaged his friend in quite a few days, when normally they would do so nearly every day.

But things had been so unordinary for Ashton lately, and Lucile had not messaged him either. Perhaps he was giving Ashton space. He was preoccupied with being engaged after all; the wedding was just around the corner.
But none of that mattered anyway. Ashton did not want to think about any of that. For now, he just wanted to be alone. And he could be.
Michelle had trusted him with the key to the studio, she had given it to him a long time ago, and Ashton had held onto it ever since. It was a treasure to him, one he would carry with him at all times, wherever he went. Sometimes he would sneak out of his home at night, and enter the club to dance. From inside, you could turn the lights all on, and because of the layout of the building and the way everything inside had been designed, that even from the outside at night, the place still looked deserted and dark.
Ashton liked that, it was like his own little pocket of the world, somewhere he could retreat to to feel safe. The only people that would enter, were Michelle, her daughters and Lucile. And in the daytime, the other students of course. But Ashton would always have private lessons with those closest to him. He knew when the club would be closed. It was only open half the week, and now, it would be deserted.
Ashton approached the place, heading along the path at the side of the building, the narrow alley. He headed for the backdoor, opening it quickly, keeping his head down.
He glanced up briefly just as he opened the door, drawing the key back out of the lock and slipping it back into his pocket. He was alone here now.
Ashton stepped into the club, closing the door behind him.

It was utterly still and silent within the dancing studio, this made Ashton happy. He loved to be here with his teacher and his friends, but other times, he just liked to be alone. Now, when he felt he had the whole world on his shoulders, he thought to himself that he only wanted solitude.
He entered the larger room, the place where they would practice. It was almost entirely empty, save for the numerous poles, set with a considerable space between one another.
On one wall, covering the entire wall from floor to ceiling were panels of mirrors, so you could watch yourself dance, check your posture, see the others dancing around you, if you weren't alone.
Ashton had brought nothing with him now, but on the days where he would dance, he would normally bring a small bag with him, that carried a change of clothes, some money, some food.
All he had on him now was the key he had used to get in, and his mobile, which he took from his pocket, setting it on the side upon a small cabinet that his teacher Michelle would store some things. Most of the time the cabinet was empty.
Ashton left his phone behind, walking slowly towards the centre of the room, towards a point nearer the mirror, all the while staring at his own reflection.
He touched one of the poles lightly, fingertips sliding down the metal.
Ashton sat then, leaning with his back against the pole, staring at his mirrored self, who stared back.
Ashton blinked slowly, his mind gradually slipping away, as his thoughts went to a different place entirely.

Marriage? What could married life be like for me? What will it be like? I have never known this man before, what will it be like to live with him, to share a life with him? I don't feel ready but…. I don't have a choice…... it is expected of me…
After a time, Ashton's eyes began to return to focus once again, as he continued to stare at his reflection.
He thought to himself...
I wonder what the future holds?
Ashton let out a heavy sigh, bowing his head.
'What's going to happen to me?' he whispered to himself under his breath.
He looked back up at himself, rising slowly to his feet, turning to face the pole.
Carefully, he reached out for the metal, running the back of his hands up the pole, before turning his hand over, stroking the pole downwards now with his fingertips.
I want to dance he thought to himself. *All I want to do is dance*.
Ashton looked back at his own reflection again, for the briefest moment, before grasping the pole firmly.
He lifted himself up upon it, arching his spine backwards, lifting his leg up as he allowed his body to spin slowly around the pole, before turning his body upside-down, continuing to twirl, staring up at the floor above him now.
Within his mind, he could hear music playing, the melody swirling in his head in time with his movements.
Ashton danced for a time, completely dedicated to the rhythm.
He did not notice Edmund enter the hall, stepping through the door behind him and walking closer.
He only noticed when Edmund was nearby, standing almost beside him, though far enough away to be at a safe distance so as not to be hit.
Ashton gasped, quickly righting himself and getting off the pole. He hunched his body, eyes wide with surprise and heart pounding in his chest.
Edmund only tilted his head, smiling warmly towards Ashton.
'W-what are you doing here?'
'What do you mean?' Edmund asked him.
'How…. did you find me?'
Edmund frowned at him, before looking away, towards the mobile that rested upon the small cabinet at the edge of the room, Ashton's mobile.
'You were tracking me?' Ashton questioned. 'But why? How?'
Edmund looked back at Ashton silently.
'When did you touch my phone?' Ashton demanded, a little angry now. 'Why…. are you following me? I wanted to be alone.'
'I was scared.'
This reply surprised Ashton, it caught him off guard, and for a time he could not speak.
'Scared?' he managed to mumble at last. 'For…me? But why?'
'The way you ran off' Edmund said, no longer his cheery self. His head was dipped, eyes to the floor. 'I…. I know it was wrong of me, but I did take your phone recently. I connected it with mine, so I could see where you were, wherever you went, at all times. So that I could track you and follow you, if we were…. apart.'
Ashton felt himself becoming angry then, feeling suddenly violated.
'Why would you do that? Why would you….?'

‘Because I was scared for you’ Edmund repeated, cutting Ashton’s words off suddenly. ‘I…’ he pursed his lips, shaking his head and looking away.
Ashton faltered then, seeing Edmund’s demeanour suddenly so fragile, nothing to what he knew before.
‘The thing is’ Edmund spoke up, before Ashton was able to ask him what was wrong. ‘I was just looking out for you. I was scared for your safety. I know how difficult this must be for you, how trapped you must feel. I don’t know how you might react.’
‘What?’
‘You won’t hear this from anyone else’ Edmund went on, his tone sombre, as he spoke in a flat voice. ‘Nobody else will say this, we are all forbidden to speak of her, myself, and anyone in my family. That was my parent’s wishes.’
Ashton blinked uncertainly at that, thinking about speaking then, but deciding to stay silent, letting Edmund finish.
‘I had a sister once’ Edmund continued. ‘She always acted so happy and bubbly. I never knew she was actually so unhappy; she always hid it so well.’ He paused, not looking at Ashton, his eyes were dead. ‘The last time I saw her, she was happy as usual, smiling, everything was completely normal, or so it seemed. I never suspected something was wrong. She told me she was going out to meet her friends in the city to do some shopping. I never saw her again. She…was found that night by police. Hung from a tree.’ Edmund clenched his jaw, swallowing tightly, still not looking at Ashton. ‘I had no idea why she wanted to kill herself. I had no idea she was suffering as she was. But…. her diary was found and…she was being bullied, relentlessly for years.’ He swallowed again, still not looking at Ashton. ‘She never said a thing. After that, we all promised to put the past behind us, to move on.’ Edmund looked up now, at last meeting Ashton’s gaze. ‘We don’t speak of her anymore, as if she never even existed. But none of us have forgotten. We all try to live as happy a life as we can. It’s what she would have wanted.’
Ashton continued to stare at Edmund, unsure of what to say.
‘I was scared for you’ Edmund began again, ‘because of her. Ever since that day, I’ve been…. very aware of other people, but in a different sort of way. I don’t want you to feel trapped. I don’t want you to die. I just…. I can’t explain it.’
There was a long silence between them. Edmund had looked away again, and when he had looked back at Ashton at last, he saw that Ashton was crying.
‘I’m sorry’ Ashton gasped. ‘*I’m so sorry*…. I didn’t know.’
Ashton looked between his fingers as he covered his face. ‘I can’t imagine what it must be like…. if my….’ But he couldn’t finish his sentence, instead dissolved into sobbing.
‘Don’t be sad’ Edmund said to him, keeping a distance. ‘She is not suffering anymore. We are all honouring her memory by living happy lives, and I…...help those around me when I can, in ways few people can truly understand.’
He continued to watch Ashton who cried silently.
‘Depression’ he said, ‘is the worst thing to brush me in my life.’
Ashton looked up at last, controlling himself.
‘We do not speak of her’ Edmund finished. ‘Not ever. Don’t be scared or confused if I act a little overprotective. I would rather overreact and find out everything is fine, than to go through anything so terrible again.’
‘I understand’ Ashton breathed. ‘Well…. I don’t…. I could never truly but…...I swear to you; I will never do anything like that!’

Edmund said nothing for a time. He just stared at Ashton.
‘Do you?’ Edmund spoke at last. ‘Do you promise?’
‘I swear. As god is my witness.’
Edmund continued to stare at him, before breaking into a smile, closing his eyes.
‘I’ve never been a religious type’ Edmund said. ‘But I guess that will do.’
He appeared relaxed now, considering Ashton with a slight smile playing about his lips.
He had seemed to have returned to himself now.
‘Can I hug you?’ Edmund asked.
‘Hu? Oh. Y-yeah.’
Ashton stepped forwards a little awkwardly, lifting his arms around Edmund and holding him.
Edmund, did the same, but appeared a little more relaxed.
‘I know this feels weird’ Edmund said. ‘It will get better in time. We may or may not be a happy couple, only time will tell, but I want to at least try. I think we have the potential to make it in this world, *together*.’
‘Yeah’ Ashton mumbled. ‘I feel the same.’
They broke apart.
‘Don’t get mad at me’ Edmund said. ‘Don’t think of me as stalking you, think of me as…. a guardian angel watching over you.’
‘That’s even more weird’ Ashton chuckled lightly.
Edmund smiled at that.
Another silence passed between them.
‘Maybe you can dance for me?’ Edmund suggested.
‘I…I can’t. I’m too shy.’
‘Now don’t give me that’ Edmund rolled his eyes. ‘You danced for me before.’
‘That was different’ Ashton argued. ‘I…I was prepared back then, now is a little scary.’
Edmund only frowned at him, giving him a wry smile.

Chapter Thirteen

Edmund went back to Ashton’s home shortly after that, bringing Ashton with him.
‘Your parents will worry if you vanish like that’ Edmund said to him as they made their way through the garden and towards one of the little doors at the back of the home. ‘You shouldn’t be doing that.’
‘It’s ok’ Ashton replied meekly. ‘They um…. don’t mind.’
‘So, they know you are going to a pole dancing club?’ Edmund raised an eyebrow.
‘Well…n-no.’ Ashton felt a stab in his heart then. ‘And you can’t tell them!’
‘Don’t worry don’t worry’ Edmund hastened. ‘I won’t say anything.’
Ashton let out a deep sigh of relief, shoulders slumped.
‘Thank heavens...’
They entered through the little door, stepping into the manor, with Edmund leading the way.

Ashton turned to close the door after him, pausing for a moment before closing his eyes, breathing slowly, then turning to follow Edmund.
‘What is that noise?’ Edmund spoke up, and as Ashton listened, he realised he could hear it too.
From where they stood in the manor the sound was muffled, but as they drew closer, they could hear the music clearer.
The song was: PewDiePie Hej Monika Remix by Party In Backyard
Edmund and Ashton drew a little closer, and as they did, the song which had been playing on a loop, swung around again to start from the beginning.
Ashton and Edmund stood in the open doorway looking into the room, and they saw what they saw.
Just as the music started from the beginning again, they saw into the recreation area, a patch in the middle of the sizable room that was free from the multicoloured balloons that covered the floor.
In this patch within the middle of the room, Maya and Isaac had made a dancefloor.
They both wore brightly coloured bikinis.
They BOTH wore brightly coloured bikinis.
And were dancing a very precise and well-practiced piece, always very close to one another.
The dancing was beautiful, if not a little weird.

Mooonika!
[Refräng:]
Hej, hej Monika
Hej på dig, Monika
Hej, hej Monika
Hej på dig, Monika
Hej, hej Monika
Hej på dig, Monika
Hej, Monika
Hej på dig, Monika
Kalla blickar, kalla kårar
och du var bara fjorton vårar
Ta min hand och visa mig vägen
Jag är din i alla lägen
(x2)
[Refräng x2]
Hej! Hej! Hej Monika!
Hej! Hej! Hej Monika!
Hej! Hej! Hej Monika!
Hej! Hej! Hej Monika!
Känns som vår kärlek kom på sned från början
Precis som lutande tornet i Pisa
Men tornet står där än idag
och här står du och här står jag
(x2)
[Refräng x2]

Monikaaa!

The song ended, and once again looped back around to the start.
But at this point, both Isaac and Maya had noticed Edmund and Ashton. They were both smiling at the young boys, grinning widely, both gasping from their excursion, bodies flecked with beads of sweat.
'Hello children!' Isaac gleamed at both of them, as Maya turned and walked away, heading towards a nearby table and lifting a jug of water above her head, before pouring it all over herself.
She shook herself like a dog before letting out a satisfied sigh.
Edmund and Ashton paid their attention to Isaac now, who stood there dressed in an unexpected manner, simply grinning at them.
'Children?' Edmund questioned.
'What are you doing?' Ashton asked them both with a weary sigh, ignoring Edmund's words.
'We are having a celebration' Isaac replied with a cheeky grin.
'Why?' Ashton asked.
'Why not?' Isaac countered.
'Well' Ashton said, unfazed by this as he began to turn away, 'we just came to see what all the noise was. You two have fun.'
He walked out of the room without another word, Edmund hesitated for a moment, staring into the room with a blank expression, unsure of what to make of all this, before he turned and followed after Ashton.
They walked together for a short time before Ashton turned to speak to him.
'I'm sorry' Ashton told him sombrely, 'but I'd like to be alone for a time.'
'Are you alright?'
'Yeah' Ashton replied with a smile, 'I just…need to be by myself. I…need to think about things.'
Edmund slowed to a stop then, staying where he was as he watched Ashton continue walking ahead.
Ashton did not turn around, but continued on his way.

Edmund remained alone for the rest of that day, wondering where Ashton was, worrying for him.
Eventually he took his phone out, tracking Ashton on it, and saw that Ashton was back at the dancing club.
'Should have guessed.'
But as evening rolled around, and Edmund sat with Ashton's parents, and his own parents at dinner, he saw that Ashton was not there.
Edmund voiced his concerns to Isaac and Maya, but Maya just brushed him off.
'He likes to wander off sometimes. He's a bit like a cat in that way. We don't know where he goes, but he always comes back, so don't worry!'
Edmund dipped his head, looking down at the food that had been brought to him by the servants.
He said nothing in response to this, but checked his phone again under the table, and saw yet again, that Ashton was still at his dancing club.

When the meal was over, Edmund excused himself before desserts could be brought out, striding from the hall after making some short and polite excuses.
His parents watched him as he went, but Isaac and Maya were distracted with the elaborate cakes that were being brought on trays towards them, carried by the servants.
Edmund allowed the door to the hall to swing gently shut behind him, checking his mobile one last time before leaving the manor, and making his way through the city.

Edmund reached the club, unlocking the door using a copy of the key that Ashton had left in his room.
He entered the dance studio, finding the place utterly deserted, the lights all left off.
Edmund turned the lights on, glancing around.
He saw Ashton's mobile lying on the table nearby, checking his own once more, before putting it away again.
He could not find Ashton, who had left his mobile behind, deliberately now, so that he could not be found.
Edmund stood for a moment, unsure of what to do, unsure of how to feel.
But Ashton was completely safe. He was resting at the home of his dancing teacher.
He sat with her daughters now, watching TV, as Michelle continued to cook for all of them.
Ashton ate a hearty meal, sitting at the table still in view of the TV. The apartment was small, but it was comfortable, and warm.
Ashton helped Michelle and her daughters to clear the table, and after that, he sat back on the sofa, continuing to watch TV with Sophia and Christa, as beside him Michelle checked over his healing wounds, applying special cream to his skin, to help it heal, and to prevent any scarring. She told him after all, that he did not want his body to scar, not when his skin was on display as it was.
'You have to look your best' she said to him, on more than one occasion.
Ashton would only turn to her, smiling widely, love and adoration in his eyes.
That night, Ashton did not return home, but instead slept at Michelle's apartment, doing so on the sofa.
Michelle checked on Ashton one last time, before saying goodnight to him, and going to her own room. Sophia and Christa were already asleep.
Ashton woke the next morning, eating breakfast before thanking Michelle profusely, giving her a hug before he left, and doing the same to her daughters.
They bade each other goodbye, before parting ways.
Ashton went back home.

Chapter Fourteen

Ashton found Edmund sitting at the breakfast table waiting for him. Ashton stood in the open doorway, staring into the room, hesitant at first to enter.
Edmund sat at the table with his chin resting on his palm. His eyes were closed, as if he had dozed off.
Ashton continued to watch him for a time, but Edmund was completely still.

He approached his fiancé tentatively, reaching out and placing a hand upon his shoulder.
Edmund opened his eyes, turning and looking up at Ashton.
A silence passed between them, then Edmund let out a heavy sigh, a smile spreading across his face.
His eyes shimmered as he looked up at Ashton.

The next few days passed uneventful, Ashton and Edmund spent their time together, as the date of the wedding drew ever closer. Each of their parents continued to make arrangements, Ashton and Edmund could only wait for the day.

On one of these days, Ashton went to visit Edmund, who had been staying at a nearby hotel, positioned by the sea.
It was a luscious building, expensive and fine. Edmund had stayed here since the time he had first come to the city, separate from Ashton, but not too far away.
As Ashton left the home, sneaking out of one of the back doors to try to avoid his parents, he was stopped suddenly by his mother.
'You know one of these days' Maya said to him with a sly gleam, 'I'll find out where you keep sneaking off to.'
'I'm just going to go visit Edmund at the hotel' Ashton replied tiredly.
'This time yes, but what about all those other times you sneak out?'
Ashton grimaced at this, turning very slowly around to look at his mother.
She only grinned back at him silently.
'Isn't there something you should be doing?' he asked her.
'My my' Maya said, leaning against the wall and folding her arms, 'you're rather stroppy today. I think in fact that you're getting a little defensive. I wonder why?'
'I'm not defensive' Ashton groaned, 'I'm just tired.'
'So where do you keep going?' Maya asked him again sweetly.
'Where's dad? Where is your WIFE? Shouldn't you be with him? You two are always together.'
'He's getting the tent set up' Maya giggled excitedly, clapping her hands together, and completely ignoring his snide comments.
'I'm not even going to ask' Ashton huffed. 'Why are you here? Are you stalking me or something?'
'What if I was?' Maya replied without pause. 'Oh wait a minute, I should do that actually! That's a great idea! That way I will be able to find out where you keep going when you leave the grounds.'
Ashton let out a heavy sigh. He should have known that his mother already knew he left the grounds, and yet she had said nothing.
Why?
'I hope you're staying safe wherever you're going. Oh wait you might get hurt again, what if you're going to climb the cliffs again…. *oh no!*'
'BYE!' Ashton said loudly then, turning from her and darting outside, slamming the door behind him.
He paused, staring back at the door just in case she tried to follow him.
But the door did not open.

Ashton turned, jogging away from the home, he made his way out of the garden, heading through the city and towards its edge, where the hotel was.
He was about halfway there, when he slowed to a stop.
Ashton looked the other way, standing in the middle of the street with his head turned to the side, mulling over his thoughts, as they gradually seeped through his mind.
He walked in the opposite direction all of a sudden, heading the other way.
Instead he went to the club.

'I just feel so lost' Ashton was saying, as beside him Lucile continued to try to work the Rubik's cube, struggling to solve the puzzle. 'I feel so conflicted. I want to do my duty, I want to do what is expected of me, what my family expects of me, but I feel so torn. I feel, I fear…' Ashton swallowed the lump in his throat. 'I fear that it will take me away from the life I wish to live, from the person I want to be. I am scared that…. if I go along with this marriage, that I will not be able to become…to be…to continue to be the person I want. A dancer.' Ashton gritted his teeth, breathing slowly, trying to calm his nerves. 'I am scared that, if I allow myself to become distanced from what I love so much, from dancing…. that…. I will not be able to…. return to it.'
Lucile who had been listening silently, stopped what he was doing, resting the cube still unsolved gently upon his lap.
'I understand what you're saying' he began. 'Well…. I don't really. I mean, how could I? I mean I can try to but…. you rich people…' he lifted the cube again. 'You really do live in another world.'
Ashton turned his head to face him, eyes wide and shimmering. He watched Lucile working with the cube, but after a few moments, his friend gave up, putting the cube down with a sigh.
'This puzzle always torments me' he frowned down at it, turning it over in his hands. 'I've known some people who can solve this in mere seconds. But I…. I just can't do it. No matter how hard I try.'
Lucile placed the cube on the other side of him upon the step, before turning back to Ashton with a smile.
'I wouldn't worry about it too much' Lucile said nonchalantly to Ashton.
'How could I not?' Ashton protested.
'Don't think about it.'
'How could I not?' Ashton repeated again, this time with a groan.
He lifted his knees up, hugging his legs to his chest.
'What am I do to?' he lamented, 'my own life is out of my hands. My future belongs to my parents…. or at least that's how it feels.'
'Well it's a good thing you have nice parents' Lucile replied.
'You've never even met them.'
'Yeah but you've spoken about them before' Lucile gleamed. 'They sound fun.'
'How could you be so casual about this' Ashton said to him, his voice grating in annoyance and mild anger now. 'You just….' He pursed his lips, turning his head sharply away and glaring at the ground beside him.
'It's not like that' Lucile spoke hastily. 'It's not…it's not like I don't care.'
'It sure feels that way' Ashton said sulkily.
Lucile let out a sigh, resigned, his shoulders slumped.

‘Life is like the ocean’ his friend said to him. ‘Sometimes you just have to go with the flow, sometimes you can’t fight it. Sometimes you have to just let the currents take you where they do. There is always a destination, even if it’s not always known, even if it’s not what you intended or wanted.’
‘What about you then?’ Ashton voiced suddenly. ‘What’s your story? You’ve never spoken about your past.’
‘I’m afraid’ Lucile spoke carefully, avoiding Ashton’s gaze now, ‘I’m afraid my story isn’t a very nice one. All I care about is today. I’m happy, and that’s all that matters. Forget the past, and don’t worry about the future. Today is happening *now*.’ He picked up the cube again and beginning to turn it over in his hands. ‘Unless of course, the past is something worth remembering, something that makes you happy. I have no such memories, not until I discovered my love for dancing.’
Ashton knew nothing of Lucile’s past, he never spoke of it, never. The most he had ever mentioned, was little snippets here and there, and only when it was relevant. The truth was however that Ashton had forgotten nearly all of what Lucile had said of his life. He supposed it didn’t matter. If Lucile wanted to keep it to himself…
‘I care about you’ Lucile said after a few moments of silence. ‘You’re my friend. I want you to be happy. But sometimes there are things in life we simply cannot control.’
Ashton waited for a time, thinking that Lucile would continue to speak, to give him advice perhaps. But Lucile said no more.
‘Do you want me to get married to him?’ Ashton said.
Lucile paused then; eyes vacant as he thought about this.
‘No’ he answered after a time. ‘I am…scared of losing you. You’re one of my best friends. Perhaps even the best, I never really thought about it before, but I don’t want to worry. I will only hurt myself in my own mind if I worry like that.’ He continued to play with the Rubik Cube, eyes appearing vacant however. ‘Whatever will be will be’ Lucile said, ‘but if you do leave this city, and start a new life with Edmund elsewhere, then I will miss you. I will never forget you.’
Ashton felt a void in his heart then, a deep pit inside of him.
Behind him through the open door, the music continued to play, as others within the club continued to practice.

Chapter Fifteen

Ashton made his way through the city, heading to its edge where the hotel was, the hotel that Edmund was staying at.
It was still early in the day, not even midday yet, and as Ashton continued to walk, drawing ever closer to his destination, he thought about the last words Lucile had said to him.
‘Maybe you need to try to get to know Edmund better. You’re probably just panicking in your mind. Don’t think too much about it, I’m sure he’s a nice guy.’
Ashton frowned to himself, thinking about these things Lucile had said.

'You'd better make the best of these few days before the wedding to get to know him. Who knows what will change once you're married?'
Ashton furrowed his brow further, body tense as these thoughts continued to fight amongst themselves within his mind.
'Everything is going to be alright in the end' he muttered to himself under his breath, willing himself to believe it. 'This is nothing….my parents…. I trust them. I have to do what is expected of me, like my sister has done.'
He had nearly reached the hotel, pausing at the edge of the curb and watching the cars on the road pass by from both directions. This was a quieter road, and Ashton didn't need the use of traffic lights to cross safely.
The hotel was right before him now, and Ashton tried to ignore the pang of nerves in his heart as he kept walking with his head down.
Ashton made his way around the building, heading towards the entrance on the other side. The hotel was built by the water, a great river ran before it that headed out into open sea. A ferry could be used to reach the land on the other side of the wide river, a smaller part of the city, where there were parks and shops and other things visiting families and holiday makers would enjoy to spend their time. Ashton rarely went here, preferring to stay on this side of the city, the larger side. That is where his home was. That is where his club was.
He paused briefly, looking across the waters. The ferries were small, as was the port which he could see a short distance away from the entrance of the hotel. This part of the city in front of the hotel was a little busier, and Ashton could see people all around going about their business, visitors, workers, residents. It was nice here.
The hotel was beige in colour, and was warm and inviting. The front of the hotel was curved at the entrance, helping to lead people through the double doors, which were propped open as the people came and went.
Ashton had paused only briefly to take in his surroundings, before making his way forwards, towards the entrance of the building, heading inside.
The entrance was modern in design and spacious. Ashton was just making his way towards the reception when he suddenly noticed something. Glancing to the side only briefly and purely by chance, he spotted the slot machines, which were tucked away in a corner of the entrance hall and part of a separate room.
The room inside would have been dark, but was constantly lit by the flashing lights from the slot machines, and the lights on the floor at the bottom of the machines.
By chance Ashton spotted a figure he thought looked familiar. As he continued to stare hard, he realised he knew this person. It was Edmund.
Ashton turned on the spot, altering his course from the reception desk, instead heading straight to the slot machines. Straight to Edmund.
'What are you doing here?'
'Hu?'
'I said' Ashton hissed under his breath, standing close to Edmund, 'what are you doing…. have you been drinking? Why are you gambling? And why are you drunk?'
'Oh hey' Edmund cackled, breaking into a wide grin. 'What are *you* doing here? Tiz a nice suprsss…'
Ashton visibly recoiled, a look of disgust on his face now. Edmund reeked of alcohol.
'How did you get so drunk? Don't they stop serving you after you start to get tipsy?'
'I forgot. T-beonest I don't remember. I think I bought some.'

Edmund reached out suddenly, caressing Ashton's cheek.
'What are you doing?'
'I want to touch you.'
'Get off me' Ashton sneered, slapping his hand away.
But Edmund was not deterred. Edmund didn't listen, instead he grabbed Ashton by the shoulder, suddenly forceful.
'Hey!' a man called out sharply. He was a big burly man; at a glance it was clear he was one of the security men.
He said no more, but continued to glare at Edmund.
Ashton felt Edmund relax his grip after a few seconds, letting go of Ashton and leaning back.
'S-sorry.'
Ashton looked over Edmund's shoulder then, giving a brief nod to the stranger.
The security guard nodded back, but continued to stare.
'Can we go somewhere…. private to talk?' Edmund asked, struggling to form his words.
'No.'
'I'm sorry. I won't do anything, I just…. want to go somewhere peace now.'
Ashton looked over Edmund's shoulder again, towards where the security guard had been. But he saw now that the man was gone, having wandered off to other places.
Ashton looked back at Edmund; his expression serious.
'Fine. We can go somewhere private. But don't touch me like that again.'
'Alright' Edmund gasped, 'I won't, I promise.'
Ashton frowned at him, not entirely convinced. She shook his head briefly, more so to himself, before turning away.
'Fine' he said again. 'Just…lead the way. I'll follow you. We can talk in your room, just don't touch me again.'
Edmund let out a heavy sigh, moving away from the slot machines and heading out across the entrance hall, towards a wide door on the other side of the hall. Beside this open doorway upon the wall was a plaque, a sign directing guests towards the rooms.
Slowly they made their way up the stairs, heading to the higher levels, to the room Edmund had been staying in since he had first arrived.

When they got there Edmund paused, glancing back at Ashton.
'What's wrong?' Ashton said to him.
'Nothing' Edmund replied. 'It's nothing. I'm just thinking.'
Ashton frowned uncertainly at that as Edmund turned away, opening the door to his room and stepping in.
Ashton followed after him.
Glancing around he saw the hotel room only briefly, before his attention returned to Edmund, who had gone over to the bed, sitting down heavily on the edge and leaning forwards with his elbows on his knees. Edmund let out a small groan, rubbing his head tenderly.
'Are you ok?' Ashton asked him.
'Um…...yeah' Edmund mumbled in reply. 'I'm just a little…my head hurts a bit you know?'
'Why are you gambling?'
'What's wrong with gambling?'
'Why are you drinking?'

Edmund groaned in irritation, lifting his eyes to Ashton's scowling then.
'Stop' he mumbled to him shortly. 'I can drink and I can gamble if I want…. you're not my mother.'
Ashton glared back at Edmund, annoyed by his response. He watched as Edmund leant backwards, resting back against the bed with his arms spread outwards. Edmund let out a heavy sigh, falling silent again, becoming still.
'Hey!'
'What?' Edmund snapped, hand going to his head. 'What do you want?'
Ashton continued to glare at him, watching as Edmund turned his head to the side to face him.
'Why are you yelling?' Edmund mumbled.
'I came out here to see you' Ashton told him. 'I wasn't expecting you to be drunk in the middle of the day.'
'I can do what I want' Edmund replied, closing his eyes and ignoring Ashton now.
'Oh. Fine. I get it' Ashton spoke shortly.
Edmund huffed, opening his eyes again and frowning at Ashton tiredly.
'This is how you're coping with the stress of the wedding right?' Ashton said.
Edmund closed his eyes.
Ashton remained where he stood, on the other side of the room near the door, watching Edmund lying still on the bed.
'I'm sorry' Edmund spoke in a whisper now, his voice barely audible. 'I didn't mean to grab you earlier. I was just feeling a little…. wild.'
'Hm.'
'I won't do it again. I um….' Edmund fell silent for a while, appearing to think about what he was about to say, or maybe had fallen asleep. 'Deep down I'm scared of the commitment. I um……have never been married before.' Edmund let out a heavy sigh. 'It's not easy you know. This is scary for me as it is for you.'
'You don't look scared.'
'We all react to things differently.'
Ashton remained where he was for a time, before slowly approaching Edmund, standing by the bed, staring down at him.
'I'm going home' Ashton said, speaking in a flat voice. 'We can talk again when you are more yourself.'
Edmund heard these words, waiting, perhaps for Ashton to say more. But he didn't.
When Edmund next opened his eyes, he saw that the room was empty, and that he was alone. He hadn't even heard Ashton leave.

Edmund stared towards the door with eyes glazed over, for a few moments, before letting out a slow breath.
He began to drift off into a deep sleep.

End of part 1

Part 2

Chapter Sixteen

The wedding was pushed forward suddenly at short notice, and everything was going too fast for Ashton.
Before he knew it, he was standing before Edmund at the altar. Ashton was unable to think, unable to even come to terms with what was happening, until it was all over.
The wedding itself was absolutely beautiful, taken place in Ashton's own home. His parents had sat at the front row, dressed in the most beautiful matching clothes. Family from both Ashton and Edmund's side had come from far and wide to attend. Edmunds parents were there of course, sitting on the bench alongside Isaac and Maya.
The entire hall had been painted white and gold for the occasion, and there were white tapestries and flowers all around the hall, an archway of purple flowers at the entrance of the hall was the only other colour in the room, the lilies were lush and vibrant.
That day for Ashton was a blur.
The reception was a lively affair, with music and tons of wonderful food. Ashton however had no appetite for any of it. His stomach was in knots.
He sat awkwardly at one of the tables now, beside his sister. The two of them watched mutely as Edmund laughed and conversed with his friends. The last few daylight hours he had barely spoken to Ashton.
There was something Ashton did notice however that slightly concerned him. Edmund had drunk nothing. Only water and juice that day. Nothing alcoholic, like he was making a conscious decision to stay away from it.
Ashton wondered why.
'Are you alright?' Alicia asked him then, breaking him out of his thoughts.
'Oh…yes' he answered hesitantly.
'Ashton?'
'I'm fine really' he replied, giving her a smile. 'I'm just uh…taking everything in. It's…you know…...this is all very strange for me.'
Alicia watched him without response, her expression neutral.
Ashton turned away from her, looking back towards Edmund, his mind whirring.

Later that evening, when it was fully dark and the guests had all departed, Edmund and Ashton walked together through the manor, at the bottom of the stairs now, they headed for Ashton's bedroom.
'I guess you'll be staying the night here?' Maya asked Edmund cheerily then.
She and Isaac were nearby, approaching the newlyweds to say their goodnights. Alicia was there also.
'Of course,' Edmund replied. 'I'm exhausted. It's been such a long day.'
A step behind him Ashton stood, hands together before him. Alicia glanced his way, but Ashton did not look back at her.

‘I guess we will see you in the morning’ Edmund said to them, smiling widely. ‘Goodnight, and thank you.’
‘Sleep well boys’ Maya waved to them, as Isaac beside her did the same.
He didn’t speak very much now, but was concentrating on not falling over, as he stood wobbling on the spot. It seemed he had had a little too much to drink.
Ashton turned away silently, following after Edmund. He glanced back only briefly to see his parents walking away, his mother supporting his father by the arm. Alicia however remained, standing there silently at the bottom of the stairs.
She was smiling at him, and Ashton smiled back, feeling a little better.
He loved his sister very much, she could make him feel better, she could always make him feel better, even without actually doing anything. Just seeing her and being beside her made him happy.
They walked along the hallway for a short time before Edmund stopped, speaking up as he glanced around.
‘I forgot which way it was. This place looks so different at night, kinda spooky.’
Ashton stopped behind Edmund, staring at the back of his head.
‘Oh’ he said pointing. ‘It’s that way.’
‘Cool’ Edmund chirped merrily back. He continued on his way.
Edmund seemed to remember the rest of the way to Ashton’s room, for he walked now with purpose and without pause, Ashton just one step behind. As they drew closer to his room, within his stomach Ashton felt growing trepidation.
‘How’re yah doing mah boi?’
‘What?’ Ashton replied.
‘I’m just playing’ Edmund looked ahead again. ‘Just ignore me. Oh look we’re here.’ He grinned. ‘After you.’

Ashton swallowed the lump in his throat, trying to ignore his nerves.
He stepped forward, opening the door.
Edmund remained where he stood, watching Ashton closely.
Ashton did not make eye contact as he stepped into his room.
Once he was inside, Edmund trailed after him, and the door swung shut behind him.
‘Ashton…’
He raised his head, facing Edmund then, shoulders slightly hunched and heart pounding in his chest.
‘Are you alright?’ Edmund asked.
Ashton raised his head with a smile upon his face, tears shimmering in his eyes.
‘I’m just overwhelmed’ Ashton breathed.
‘You know I won’t do anything you wouldn’t want me to’ Edmund said to him, raising his hand, caressing Ashton’s cheek tenderly.
He stepped forwards, closing the distance between them.
Ashton tilted his head upwards as Edmund dipped his, planting a gentle kiss on his lips. Ashton opened his mouth wider, letting out a slight gasp as Edmund grasped him firmly, his hold tightening on Ashton’s shoulder.
Edmund leant back for a moment, looking briefly into Ashton’s eyes, before leaning forwards and kissing him again.
Edmund pushed Ashton gently back onto the bed, crawling forwards and bearing over him.

‘I love you Ashton…I love you…’
Ashton’s eyes widened at this, heart skipping in his chest now.
Edmund moved his head down, trailing kissing along Ashton’s jaw, down his neck and across his collar bone. His finger moved to Ashton’s shirt, teasing the button lose, and then another.
Edmund paused again, leaning back momentarily and gazing into Ashton’s face.
Beneath him Ashton breathed slowly, cheeks flushed and head turned to the side. He did not react as Edmund bore over him again, continuing to unbutton Ashton’s shirt until his chest was fully exposed.
Ashton flinched as Edmund bit him firmly, sucking his nipples, running his tongue across his naked skin. Edmund grabbed the top of Ashton’s trousers then.
‘W-wait’ Ashton gasped.
But Edmund quickly silenced him with a kiss, slipping his tongue deep into him, causing Ashton to moan.
‘Trust me’ Edmund whispered, speaking softly into his ear. ‘Trust me, I’ll make you feel good.’
Ashton remained still, on his back and staring up at the ceiling.
Edmund moved down his body then. Ashton heard the shuffle of clothes.
Edmund caressed Ashton between the legs, massaging him, causing him to swell.
Before Ashton knew what was happening, Edmund had unzipped him, pulling his trousers down.
Ashton let out a small cry of surprise, but Edmund ignored this, instead opening his mouth wide, taking all of Ashton in.
Ashton moaned deeply, throwing his head back and gritting his teeth, grasping the sheets.
‘Ah…Ed-mund…’
Ashton moved one hand to grab Edmund by the head, gripping his hair tightly. Edmund did not pause, but took Ashton’s hand off him firmly, grasping it in his own.
Ashton’s other hand went to cover his mouth, his body began to tremble with pleasure, arching his back.
‘Edmund…. y…y-our tongue…’
Edmund didn’t stop, but glanced up at Ashton now, salivating heavily.
‘I’m coming…’ Ashton rasped. ‘I’m…. *haaa*….’
Ashton grabbed Edmund’s head with both his hands now, lifting his pelvis off the bed, holding Edmund tightly over him, keeping him there for a moment, before releasing him.
Edmund slowly straightened up, dripping from his mouth. He wiped his lips with his thumb, swallowing deeply and grinning a wide grin.
‘It’s my turn now…’
He leant back from Ashton then, sitting on his heels and breathing deeply. He took his shirt off, pulling it over his head and tossing it to the side.
‘Ashton’ he uttered, his voice low and seductive. ‘Ashton…’
He leaned over him again, kissing him passionately.
Ashton flinched nervously, moaning between kisses.
Edmund leant back from Ashton for the second time, this time moving far more slowly.
‘Ashton’ he uttered. ‘I love you.’
Ashton’s heart leapt in his chest, and he stared up at Edmund uncertainly.
‘I want you to trust me’ Edmund whispered, moving his hand down Ashton’s body, his fingers tickling his skin as he went, teasing Ashton, almost toying with him.
His grip tightened suddenly then, grasping Ashton’s trousers, causing him to flinch again.

‘It’s ok’ Edmund breathed, ‘trust me…you can trust me.’
Ashton let out a breath, leaning back against the bed, trying to relax his body.
Edmund pulled Ashton’s trousers down the whole way, sliding his hand around and behind him, beginning to play with him.
‘It feels weird’ Ashton whispered.
‘It will at first’ Edmund replied in a hushed voice. ‘But you’ll get used to it.’
Edmund took his own trousers off then, bearing over Ashton once more. He leaned forwards, resting on his elbow with his brow gently pressed against Ashton’s, with his other hand he moved to himself, stroking himself softly, before moving his hand away.
‘What’s that?’ Ashton whispered.
‘It’s alright’ Edmund replied. ‘Just trust me ok? This will make it easier.’
Ashton heard the sound of a bottle cap. He heard the sound of Edmund rubbing himself again, before bearing over him.
‘I love you Ashton. I love you so much.’
Ashton turned his face towards Edmund, tilting his head back slightly as Edmund kissed him. He drew a sharp intake of breath as Edmund slid inside. His arms came up then, embracing Edmund, as Edmund held onto him tightly, thrusting slowly, but deeply.
Ashton couldn’t help but let out a low moan, parting his legs wider, as he felt the pleasure growing in his body evermore.

Chapter Seventeen

The next day, Ashton and Edmund walked through the city once more.
‘You know this is really such a wonderful place’ Edmund voiced jovially, spreading his arms out wider and grinning at the world around them.
Walking a little way behind him was Ashton, who stared after Edmund a little uncertainly.
Edmund stopped abruptly then, turning on the spot and looking back at Ashton with a grin.
‘Keep up squirt.’
‘Don’t call me that’ Ashton scowled.
‘Oh, come on lighten up’ Edmund said, turning away now and rolling his eyes. ‘You need to chill a little. Stop being so uptight.’
‘I’m not uptight.’
‘Whatever you say squirt.’
Ashton let out a sound of irritation, gritting his teeth and glaring.
‘Edmund.’
‘Yes my husband?’
Ashton frowned at that. This all felt so weird still.
‘I uh….’
Ashton dipped his head, eyes dropping to the ground.

‘I um……..’
Edmund returned to him then, causing Ashton to give a little start.
He was so caught up in his own thoughts, he hadn’t noticed Edmund come back to him.
‘Ashton’ he spoke with sincerity, taking Ashton’s hands in both his own.
Ashton swallowed a little uncertainly, closing his eyes as Edmund leaned forwards for a kiss.
Ashton felt Edmund’s lips touch gently on his own. He parted his mouth a little, allowing Edmund to slip his tongue in.
Edmund opened his eyes, looking at Ashton intently, before leaning back again and letting go of him.
‘Was there something you wanted to say to me my husband?’ Edmund asked him.
Ashton fought to keep any expression from his face, determined not to reveal to Edmund how he might be feeling.
He still wasn’t sure at this time if Edmund was being sincere when he addressed him as that, or if he was secretly teasing him. Ashton had not decided.
‘I wanted to ask’ Ashton began, ‘when you wanted to go home?’
‘Why, are you getting bored? Are you tired? Oh! Maybe you want to have some alone time, just the two of us as newlyweds’ he winked seductively.
Edmund stepped forwards
‘Uh….’
‘Wait a second, when you ask do you mean me individually or us together?’
‘I guess I’m still a little confused’ Ashton admitted bashfully.
‘What do you mean?’
‘Well um…’
‘Stop saying *um*.’
Ashton was caught a little off guard by this.
‘Sorry I’m just nervous.’
‘That’s fine’ Edmund sighed. ‘I’ll show you how to be more confident.’
‘Right’ Ashton grinned awkwardly. ‘Thanks.’
‘No worries. Now what did you want to say?’
‘Well I was thinking’ Ashton began, holding his hands together before him nervously. ‘Some thoughts just crossed my mind about a certain subject.’
‘And what subject is that then?’ Edmund asked, scratching the back of his head and tilting his head towards the sky, watching distractedly as a seagull glided overhead.
‘I was wondering about our living situation’ Ashton blurted out, his cheeks flushing as he forced the words from his mouth. ‘Are we getting a place together on our own? Or are we going to stay here or at your home? I know my sister moved to live with her husband.’
He got these words out as quickly as possible, clenching his jaw shut suddenly to keep himself from saying anymore. From saying too much. From saying something he might regret.
‘You want to know where we’re going to live?’ Edmund fell silent for a moment, appearing to think about it. ‘The truth is its not been fully decided. But one thing is for sure’ he said looking to Ashton. ‘No matter where we go, we will be together.’
‘I thought as much.’
‘Is there something wrong with that?’
‘Not at all’ Ashton replied. ‘I was just wondering…’
‘Wondering what? You look tired by the way.’
‘I was wondering when we’ll be going home. We’ve been walking around for hours now.’

‘Did you want a sit down?’
‘Hmm.’
Edmund turned away then, looking towards the waters.
‘Let’s go that way first.’
‘Towards the ferries?’ Ashton asked confused. ‘Why?’
‘Trust me’ Edmund said grabbing him by the sleeve and dragging him along. ‘Let’s go!’
Ashton stumbled slightly as he followed after Edmund, feeling more confused than ever.

When they got to the ferry port, and only then, did Edmund finally let go of Ashton’s sleeve.
Ashton continued to stare a little confused, as Edmund was looking about the place, glancing in all directions.
‘What are you looking for?’ Ashton asked him.
‘I just uh…nothing. No wait I just saw my friend get on that ferry. We have to go see him!’
‘What? B-but the ferry is about to leave’ Ashton protested.
‘Trust me’ Edmund hurried. ‘I’ll be really quick, and you have to come with me’ he added hastily.
Something felt very off about this, but Ashton had no time to think about it, as Edmund grabbed him again, this time not by the sleeve, but by the wrist, pulling him along.
Ashton’s next words and questions died in his throat, as he allowed himself to be taken onto the ferry.

When they boarded the ferry, Edmund continued to pull him across the deck, heading far towards the other side of the ferry.
‘Edmund what…?’
Ashton’s words were cut short then as Edmund rounded on him, pushing him against the wall roughly without warning and kissing him.
Ashton let out a gasp of surprise, unable to fend Edmund off.
Edmund took advantage of his hesitation and kissed him deeper, grabbing both his wrists now and pushing his hips against Ashton’s, pinning him against the wall.
‘Edmund…’
Edmund broke off suddenly, opening a nearby door and shoving Ashton in, snapping the door shut behind them.
‘Edmund wait’ Ashton fumbled.
‘No’ Edmund growled aggressively. ‘I won’t wait, I can’t.’
The next thing Ashton knew, was that they were in the car-hold of the ferry, away from other people.
It was silent here now.
‘Get on your knees’ Edmund growled.
‘What?’
‘Get on’ Edmund spoke softly now between kisses, ‘…your knees.’
‘Edmund…’
Ashton was forced downwards before he knew what was happening. He looked up at Edmund with wide eyes, seeing as Edmund unzipped himself.
‘I love to see you looking up at me like this.’

‘Hu…?’
‘Open. Your mouth.’
Ashton no longer tried to resist. Instead he leant back against the wall, opening his mouth.
Edmund was already hard, grabbing Ashton by the hair and stepping forwards.
‘I can’t resist you any longer’ he gasped, before pushing himself in.

Ashton stepped out onto the deck again, feeling the wind blowing through his hair. He glanced about him hesitantly, body hunched over, hugging himself.
‘There was…. n-no friend was there?’ Ashton glowered, speaking to the air as Edmund stepped out from behind him, letting out a deep sigh and wiping his brow with the back of his hand.
‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’
Ashton let out a reluctant groan as Edmund walked away from him, heading towards the railings.
‘Wait’ Ashton suddenly realised, eyes widening in shock. ‘We’re moving, the ferry is…’
Edmund said nothing as he leant forwards against the rails, folding his arms, taking in the sea air.
He continued to say nothing.
‘Edmund what’s going on?’
‘Don’t you want to see where I live?’
‘What?’
Edmund looked at him at last, meeting his gaze. ‘I’m taking you home.’

Chapter Eighteen

The ferry finally docked many hours later, and Ashton managed to at long last get off and onto solid ground again, feeling a little sick and lightheaded from the journey. He decided he didn’t particularly like the sea, or maybe his nerves were due to something else. He couldn’t tell.
‘Are you alright mah man?’ Edmund said jovially from behind him.
Ashton hunched over suddenly then without warning, throwing up in a nearby bin.
He straightened up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.
‘I feel a lot better now actually’ Ashton answered in a normal tone. ‘I think I just had to get that out.’
Edmund appeared to be annoyed a little by this, turning his head away sharply but saying nothing.

Ashton reached into his pocket then, taking out his mobile.
'YOINK!'
'Hey give that back!' Ashton cried indignantly.
'Dam you have a pass lock on this thing?' Edmund tutted in aggravation as he examined it. 'That sucks.'
'Of course, I…why wouldn't I want to….?' Ashton broke off, swallowing nervously. 'Just give it back.'
Edmund cocked his head at Ashton, but instead of listening and giving the mobile back, he pocketed it, hiding it away inside his jacket.
'Actually, I think I'll keep it.'
'What?'
'Silly baby.'
'Don't call me that' Ashton replied sullenly.
'You know…you look more handsome when you smile.'
'Stop teasing me! I don't like it.'
'Hm?'
Edmund straightened slightly, looking Ashton in the eye.
'Fine. I will stop. But you don't get your phone back.'
'Why?'
'Don't you trust me?' Edmund asked, showing his hands to Ashton then in a submissive gesture.
'No!'
'Wow. You didn't even hesitate.'
'I barely even know you and I've been forced to marry you!'
Ashton fell quickly silent, glaring about him awkwardly then, cheeks going red.
Some of the people moving around them had paused to stop and stare, and the ones that hadn't stopped, continued to glance their way.
'You…. didn't want…. you mean you didn't want to marry me?' Edmund sounded genuinely hurt by this.
'I n-never said that' Ashton fumbled in desperation.
'You could have said no.'
'I…. I don't know.'
'Come on' Edmund said, his voice tender and his tone gentle.
Ashton gave a slight start as Edmund took his hand carefully.
'I'll take you to home and show you around. Won't that be fun?'
'Um…...I guess.'
'Trust me my husband' Edmund said clasping Ashton's hand now in both his own. 'I love you, and though you may not feel quite the same now? Well…. let's just give it a chance yes?'
'Um' Ashton mumbled uncomfortably. 'Ok.'
'I'm just having some fun' Edmund gleamed excitedly, his smile wolfish.
'Can I have my phone back?'
'Nope! Ha ha. You have to do something for me first.'
'Like what?'
'I haven't decided yet.'
'Hu?'
Edmund glanced away.

‘Home is that way’ he pointed. ‘We’ll have to take a taxi…come on.’
Edmund pulled Ashton along yet again, at this point Ashton was getting tired of being dragged around. He was struggling to keep pace with Edmund, all the while staring at Edmund’s jacket, where inside lay his mobile.

They arrived at Edmunds home, and as the taxi pulled away behind them to head to the next pick up, Ashton was able to see the mansion for the first time.
It was fairly unremarkable to him, large and grand just like his own home, though unlike his own home this mansion was built on flat ground, not on a high point where the area around could be seen clearly.
The garden, Ashton found himself thinking, was especially beautiful.
‘Well?’ Edmund who stood beside him asked eagerly. ‘What do you think?’
‘I uh…’ Ashton fumbled, ‘it’s lovely. Really lovely. I like the flowers.’
‘Hmmm.’
‘I still don’t really understand why we came here?’ Ashton mumbled, hunching his shoulders slightly.
‘What do you mean? I wanted to show you where I grew up. I’ve lived here all my life.’
‘But um…. where is your stuff? Like…. your bags and stuff. Don’t you have any *things*? You must have left your bags back at the hotel, right?’
‘The servants can bring those later’ Edmund waved away. ‘It’s not important.’
‘Oh…right…’
Ashton flinched slightly as Edmund took him by the hand, doing so purely out of surprise.
‘You don’t need to act so jumpy.’
‘Sorry’ Ashton grinned awkwardly.
Edmund cocked his head.
‘Well?’
‘W-what?’
‘Are you ready? I would like to show you around.’
‘Oh of course! Sorry I was uh…...mmm.’
‘I know I know, this must all be very sudden for you’ Edmund replied confidently, taking a step forward and making Ashton move along beside him, still holding his hand firmly.
Together they walked along the gravel path, heading towards the mansion.

Once inside, Ashton was able to look around. It was as he expected it to be, large, beautiful, clean. As Ashton glanced to the side, he saw a servant polishing a large oak desk. The place was spotless, and lavish.
‘Ah, there you are.’
Ashton heard a female voice, and saw both of Edmund’s parents approaching.
He immediately felt a twinge of nervousness.
Edmund’s mother, Alannah, was the one who had spoken. She stopped before Ashton and Edmund, behind her now was Edmund’s father, Alastair.
‘I’m glad you’re finally here’ Alannah said to Ashton promptly.
‘I’m sorry?’ Ashton mumbled, laughing a little nervously.

‘If there is anything you need’ Alannah said, ‘we will provide it for you. Please don’t hesitate to ask.’
‘Oh’ Ashton forced a smile uncomfortably. ‘Thank you very much.’
Alastair said nothing, instead stood behind Alannah watching mutely, his expression blank.
Alannah gave a curt nod.
‘I hope you are happy here’ she said to him. ‘We will do everything we can to make you feel happy, to make you feel at home.’
‘Thank you very much’ Ashton said again, unsure of what else to say.
Alannah nodded again, giving him a brief smile, before walking away without another word, Alastair following after her.
Once they were gone, Ashton turned back to Edmund, the edges of his lips twitching nervously.
‘So?’ Edmund said to him. ‘What do you think? You said you were wondering when we’d be going home. Well now you know.’ He threw his hands out dramatically. ‘Welcome to your new home!’
Ashton was too shocked and confused to speak. He was completely lost for words…
‘You’ll be spending the night here’ Edmund went on, ‘tonight, and forever.’
Ashton’s stomach knotted then, and he felt as if the floor had dropped below him.
What is going on? Have I just been kidnapped?????

Chapter Nineteen

That night, Ashton ran away.
The evening had been as normal as it possibly could have been. Ashton was shown around Edmund’s home, as Edmund had told him repeatedly, it was Ashton’s home now too. They went through the different large rooms. Ashton was told where everything was, he was shown the gardens, the beautiful ponds that where there that grew wild with lily pads and all sorts of natural plants that Ashton was unfamiliar with. They sat on a wide swinging bench, the chains above them attached to the branch of the large tree that hung overhead.
As the day began to grow dark, they went back inside to eat their evening meal, Ashton could not deny that he was starting to get hungry. Here he met Edmund’s parents again, and saw more of the servants. After the main meal, they ate dessert and after that, drank coffee and tea. In this time Ashton was able to converse with Alastair and Alannah, slowly finding out more about them, as he told them in turn more about himself. They both seemed very interested in him. Ashton supposed it was only natural, and he wondered briefly what his parents had told them about him before all of this. How much had they known of him before he had even met them?
Afterwards, Edmund and Ashton went up to the room that they now shared.
It was large and beautiful and rich and completely unremarkable in every way to Ashton, much like his own room. To him this was all just so normal.

Ashton dipped his head, feeling a pang of loneliness. He missed his teacher Michelle, his dancing instructor, and he missed Lucile, whom he would have called his best friend, and he missed the sisters Sophia and Christa.
He wondered what Michelle and her daughters were doing now. And he wondered also was Lucile was doing now.
Where they thinking about him? Perhaps wondering where he was?
'What's on your mind?' Edmund asked, moving around him after closing the bedroom door. 'You look glum.'
Ashton's eyes flickered quickly towards Edmund's chest, inside the jacket he still held Ashton's mobile.
Ashton glanced for only a second before looking away again towards the floor.
'I miss my friends' he mumbled to his feet.
'Don't be sad. I know you must miss them but…they're not gone forever. It's nothing like that' Edmund said. 'Oh! I know! You miss dancing, don't you?'
'I do miss dancing' Ashton replied without a pause, lifting his head and smiling automatically at the thought of it. 'I would love to…' he trailed off.
'Well I'm afraid that unfortunately we don't have any sort of dancing clubs around here.'
'How do you know?'
'I already checked' Edmund winked. 'I care about you after all.'
'Oh, um, thank you. That was very nice of you, you didn't have to.'
'But I did' Edmund replied. 'I know that dancing is important to you, and that makes it important to me. I love you.'
Ashton felt his stomach tighten at those words. He still hadn't settled yet.
'You know…' Edmund continued with a smile, '…one day I hope you'll be able to say it back to me freely.'
Ashton said nothing to this, instead simply smiled to Edmund.
'Anyway, as I was going to say' Edmund went on, 'we could arrange a dancing studio to be made here. There are plenty of spare rooms…and we can keep it a secret from everyone, even my parents.' Edmund put his finger to his lips then, 'it will be our little secret.'
'That's very kind of you' Ashton replied. 'I don't know what to say.'
'I'll show you around some of the unused rooms in this place sometime, it would be easy to put up a pole for you.'
Ashton's eyes dropped to the ground.
'What's wrong?'
'I will miss my friends.'
Edmund said nothing to this. Ashton looked up at him, starting slightly.
'I'm sorry, I've upset you!' Ashton fumbled, seeing Edmund's dampened expression.
'I'm trying everything I can to make you happy, why can't you see that?'
'I want to go home.'
'This is your home.'
'I want to see my parents.'
'Why?'
Ashton bit his lip, feeling so conflicted.
Edmund let out a steady breath, seemingly trying to calm his nerves. Ashton had no idea how he must be feeling, but he looked tense.
'It's getting late' Edmund said quietly after a time. 'We should both go to bed.'

Ashton waited until he was sure Edmund was fast asleep before making his escape. Shuffling carefully away from Edmund as he lay beside him, Ashton moved the sheets back gently, tip-toeing across the room.
He paused, careful not to make a noise as he glanced back towards Edmund. But Edmund remained fast asleep. He did not stir.
He took Edmund's coat, feeling the pockets for his phone but finding nothing.
Ashton gave up, and instead just left the room, moving swiftly down the corridors, grabbing his shoes and leaving through the unlocked front door.
He disappeared into the night.

Chapter Twenty

Ashton jogged onwards, gasping and panting, he could already feel the sweat dampening his shirt, but he did not stop.
He did not know which way he was going, but he continued on regardless.
Eventually he did finally slow, coming to a red phone box. The dim light from within shone to him, the rest of the street was fairly dark, and eerily silent. Ashton could not deny feeling a little afraid.
He slipped into the phone box, closing the door quickly behind him and glancing about.
He seemed to be completely alone; he didn't know how late it was. No one else was around, and there were no lights on in the houses nearby.
Ashton thought for a moment to himself, wracking his mind for the number that he needed, the number to his home.
He dug his hands into his pockets, praying silently to himself, experiencing a wash of relief as he found what he was looking for. Change for the phone.
Ashton picked up the phone, pushing the coins into the slot and dialling the number.
He waited nervously as he listened to the dial tone, fiddling with the cord.
It felt as if he was waiting forever.
Finally, the line connected.
'Hello Luigi's Pizza?'
'What?'
'Oh…Ashton is that you? Hey!'
'Mum what are you doing?'
'Nothing darling' Maya replied cheerily. 'How are you?'
Ashton was silent for a moment, caught suddenly in confusion, before abruptly snapping back to himself.
'I…. mum, I've been kidnapped!'
Maya immediately began to chuckle heartily on the line.
'Darling what are you talking about?'
'E-Edmund. He…won't let me go back home.'
'What do you mean?'

‘I can’t get back home.’
‘Why would you want to come back here?’ Maya asked, speaking in a sweet voice.
Ashton heard the clatter of pots and pans falling in the background, he heard the sound of his father’s voice, though couldn’t make out what he was saying.
‘You’re living with Edmund now.’
‘What?’
‘*I SAID YOU’RE LIVING WITH EDMUND NOW!’*
‘…… mum I can hear you I just didn’t understand.’
‘Vivirás con Edmund ahora.’
‘What?’
‘Listen I can’t talk right now; your father and I are rather busy.’
‘Why didn’t you tell me?’
‘Tell you what?’
‘You’ve evicted me!’
‘Oh, honey it’s not like that’ Maya giggled in amusement. ‘You’re acting like this is some sort of giant conspiracy to get rid of you, it’s not like that.’
‘Then why didn’t you tell me this was the plan?’
‘I’m sorry sweet pea, it just totally slipped my mind, what with the shipment of the pygmy goats and that.’
‘What?’
‘They will be keeping the rabbits company.’
‘What?’
‘Listen I’ve got to go’ Maya said abruptly. ‘Your father’s started a small fire in the kitchen.’
‘Hey wait!’
But the line went dead.
Ashton was left standing in the echoing silence, hearing nothing now, but the occasional gust of wind from outside.
He placed the received slowly back down.
He didn’t know what to do.

He was found by the shore in the morning, a search party had been sent out to look for him, and by pure chance, Edmund was in the group that was searching the beaches.
Edmund came up behind Ashton, who was sitting now upon the rocks, hugging his knees, head buried in his folded arms.
‘Ashton.’
He lifted his head gingerly.
Ashton looked around blearily, seeing Edmund standing there.
He looked pissed.
‘You ungrateful….’ Edmund bit his tongue then, gritting his teeth and glaring. ‘Ashton’ he began again calmly. ‘I want you to come home with me.’
Ashton rose to a stand, wobbling slightly on his feet.
‘Your skin is ice cold….’
Ashton did not reply. He was desperately tired, having stayed awake all night.

Edmund took him back home.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ashton was given a bath, and went to bed to rest.
He slept deeply.
At one-point Edmund entered his room, their room, they now shared together.
Ashton did not wake as Edmund lay on the bed beside him, resting on his side and staring at Ashton.
His hand moved in the sheets, and he found Ashton's hand.
He grasped Ashton's hand only lightly, running his thumb over his skin gently.

Ashton woke when it began to get dark, eyes widening when he noticed that Edmund was lying by his side.
He was sound asleep.
Ashton stared at him for a time, unsure of what to do.
Ashton sat up slowly, never taking his eyes off his husband.
Feeling him shift in the bed, Edmund opened his eyes.
He sat up also, turning to face Ashton.
'You've been sleeping by my side all this time?' Ashton mumbled.
'Of course I have. You seem to still not understand that I care for you.'
'I'm sorry' Ashton sobbed then, lifting his hand to brush his tears away. 'I'm sorry I left… I'm sorry I hurt you.'
Ashton abruptly stopped crying, feeling Edmund touch his hand again.
'There's no reason to cry' he spoke tenderly to Ashton, 'not with me by your side.'
Ashton's breath caught in his throat.
'And to think…that I was trying to get away from this.'
Edmunds expression became pained then, but only for an instant.
'Come on' he said to Ashton. 'I want to show you something.'
'What is it?'
'Come with me' Edmund said with a playful frown, 'and I will show you.'

Ashton followed Edmund through the manor. Everything was dark now, and the corridors for the most part were lit only by dim lights at intervals, casting portions of the manor in darkness.
'This place is so different at night' Ashton said, as he trailed after his husband. 'It's kind of…. eerie.'
'You're not afraid now are you?' Edmund glanced back at him; eyebrow raised.
'No of course not' Ashton replied indignantly.

‘Good.’ Edmund took him by the hand then. ‘Because I would hate to think that you would be afraid in your own home.’
Ashton’s heart skipped a beat upon hearing that, that word standing out to him.
Home.
‘Where are we going anyway?’
‘My my so impatient’ Edmund tutted in reply.
‘Oh. S-sorry.’
They stopped a few seconds later at the base of a set of stairs. They were pretty steep, at the bottom of the stairs by the wall was a coat hanger, upon which were several thick woollen coats.
‘What’s this?’ Ashton voiced, as Edmund put one of the coats around Ashton’s shoulders.
‘So many questions’ Edmund sighed and shook his head. ‘If you don’t stop, I will have to do something to silence that pretty mouth of yours.’
‘W-what?’
‘Oh, relax I’m only teasing you. Or am I? Now come on.’
Edmund took a coat for himself from the hanger and put it on, before ascending the steep steps. Ashton lingered at the bottom for a few moments, hesitating only briefly, before following after Edmund up the steps.

They stepped through the innocuous door at the top of the stairs. Through this door, was a small balcony, the grey tiles of the rooftop were either side and before them as they stepped out onto the modest area. There was a low iron railing of gothic design at the front of the space, set there for safety. There was little else here, save for a box which rested in one of the dark corners.
Ashton resisted the urge to ask Edmund what he was doing as he watched him go over to the box, opening it up. Ashton hugged the coat tighter to himself, his breath a fog in the air before him.
Edmund came back with two pillows, setting them on the ground side by side.
In his other hand he held something else.
‘A telescope?’ Ashton voiced.
Edmund paused briefly, meeting Ashton’s gaze.
‘I’ve not told you this before, at least I don’t think I have but um, I uh….’
‘What is it?’ Ashton asked confused now. ‘Are you blushing.’
‘No I'm not’ Edmund answered abruptly.
‘Then what…?’
‘I like stargazing.’
‘Stargazing?’
‘It’s a hobby of mine. I come up here from time to time when I want to be alone. And I watch the stars.’
‘That’s…’ Ashton began, ‘beautiful…’
‘Don’t tease me’ Edmund mumbled, speaking awkwardly now and staring at his feet.
‘No, I wasn’t! I…I think it’s really sweet. I have my dancing, and you….’
He broke off then, staring at the ground.
‘I…I um….’
‘Are you trying to say that you love me?’ Edmund grinned.
Ashton raised his head again, eyes wide.
‘What?’ Ashton gasped. ‘No. where did that come from?’

‘It’s ok, you don’t have to make yourself say it. You can say it when you’re ready.’
Edmund stepped closer to Ashton, moving his lips so close to his ear and whispering seductively.
‘I……looooooooooove……yoooouuu…...Ashton.’
He leaned back then, turning away.
Ashton hunched his shoulders, cheeks flushed now.
‘Come and sit down’ Edmund said, resting on one of the cushions and indicating Ashton to do the same as he set up the telescope. ‘I’ll show you some of the stars.’
‘Oh! Um…o-okay…’
Ashton sat awkwardly as Edmund shot him a glance.
As soon as Ashton looked towards him, Edmund quickly turned his head away. But Ashton could see the grin still on his face. Was he playing with him?
‘Ok here we go’ Edmund said once he had everything set up.
He had spent a moment looking through the telescope himself, making sure it was in the right position before leaning back and letting Ashton have a look.
‘Do you see that?’
‘I see something’ Ashton said.
‘That’s Ursa Major. The bear. It’s one of the easiest to recognise, and one of the most well-known constellations in the sky.’
‘A bear?’ Ashton repeated. ‘It doesn’t look like a bear.’
‘They don’t look like what they are called’ Edmund smirked back in amusement. ‘You have to use your imagination a little…here…’
Ashton glanced around as he watched Edmund go back to the box set in the corner. He returned shortly with a small sketchpad and a pencil.
Using the light from his mobile he began to draw a line of dots, then connect them up.
‘Is that my mobile?’ Ashton chirped.
‘Nope. I still have that. Now pay attention.’ He frowned to himself. ‘I’m not very good at drawing bears but…here is the rough outline.’
He leant back so that Ashton could get a better view.
‘I think I see it!’ Ashton gasped.
He looked back through the telescope.
‘Oh my god I see it. That’s so cool!’
Edmund smiled widely at this.
‘You can sort of see that a part of it looks like a saucepan’ Edmund went on. ‘Look.’
Ashton glanced back at the sketchbook, seeing Edmund had drawn heavier lines now between some of the point.
‘It does look like a saucepan’ Ashton mumbled, before looking back through the telescope. ‘That’s amazing.’
‘Now’ Edmund said. ‘If you shift the telescope very carefully…on the left side of the ‘pan’…imagine a line going downwards…’
‘Okay…?’ Ashton replied doing so.
‘Do you see a bright blue-white star?’
‘I do.’
‘That’s called Regulus. It’s part of the constellation Leo. The lion.’
Ashton leant back then slightly from the telescope, eyes becoming a little distant.
‘This one does look more like a lion’ he voiced weakly.

‘Now if you go back up to the bear’ Edmund continued. ‘Follow a line curving leftwards from the bear’s tail, you’ll see a bright star. That’s called Arcturus. It means ‘bear-keeper’. That is the brightest star of the constellation Bootes, the herdsman. He drives the bear and the lion around the north star as the night moves overhead.’
‘That’s truly incredible’ Ashton breathed. ‘You really know a lot…I had no idea you were into this.’
‘I don’t want to sound like a nerd but…. I know a few things about space.’
‘What else?’
‘Well…’ Edmund began. ‘Jeez you’re really putting me on the spot now.’
‘Don’t tell me you’re nervous around me.’
‘Of course not! Now let me think. Uh…. the sun is closer to our planet than all other stars.’
‘Duh. Everyone knows the sun is a star.’
‘Ok fine’ Edmund frowned in mock annoyance. ‘There are 88 official constellations, different constellations become visible throughout the year. The night sky is constantly changing depending on the time of year and the time of night.’
‘Go on’ Ashton urged. ‘What else?’
‘Let’s see…’ Edmund mused. ‘Constellations have been linked together to depict mythological creatures, animals and objects from our past. That has allowed early people to ‘organise’ the nights sky to assist in their religious studies of the celestial heavens as well as more earthly applications. Take for example…. measuring time, or as a directional compass, or predicting the seasons for farming. All very important.’
‘I had no idea the stars could affect us so much.’
‘Well you must have known that the moons gravitational pull is what effects the oceans tide?’
‘Well yes in fact I did know that.’
‘Did you know that astronomers have managed to identify and name up to 140 moons that orbit all 8 planets in our solar system?’
‘No, I didn’t know that.’
‘Well now you do. I’m literally a walking encyclopaedia when it comes to stars and space and stuff.’
‘Show me more constellations’ Ashton urged. ‘I want to learn them all.’
‘Ok calm down now’ Edmund chuckled. ‘Let me help you.’

They went to bed together, and slept peacefully side by side.
This time, Ashton slept soundly. That was until the early morning, when they were both abruptly woken by a loud call.
Edmund jerked awake, glancing around the bedroom blearily, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.
‘Da fuq?’
‘I think someone is calling your name’ Ashton mumbled, sitting up and pulling the sheets tighter to him.
Edmund groaned loudly, rolling quickly out of bed and making his way across the room.
Ashton jumped out of bed after him, grabbing his dressing gown and covering himself up as he did. He found Ashton marching down the corridor, heading down the stairs as the sound of Alannah’s voice echoed through the rooms.
‘Edmund!’

'*I'M COMING!*'
He reached the bottom of the stairs and stomped towards the front door, where his mother was waiting for him.
'What?!'
'Don't *what* me' Alannah growled at him, looking furious. 'What the hell is this?'
'Oh shit' Edmund grumbled. 'This was not supposed to come until this afternoon when you were supposed to be out.'
Ashton finally caught up to Edmund, coming up behind him. He saw on the floor by the front door several boxes. Leaning closer trying to get a better look, he read the label on one of the boxes.
'Floor to ceiling mirrors…' he mumbled, turning his attention to another, 'and…. poles?'
'Why are you buying this?' Alannah demanded of her son. 'What is the meaning of this?'
'Um' Edmund sighed calmly.
'Answer me. Explain yourself.'
'What's to explain' Edmund shrugged nonchalantly. 'I've found a new hobby.'
'You're a pole dancer now?'
'Yeah? So?'
Ashton turned white, taking a step back and glancing up towards Alannah, feeling suddenly terrified.
'Are you out and about flaunting your body to strangers?' Alannah snapped.
'So what if I am?!' Edmund yelled back. 'What's it to you!'
'It's mine!'
Silence suddenly fell, and Edmund and Alannah both glanced around to stare at Ashton.
'It's mine' Ashton repeated, speaking quieter now. 'I…. I'm a pole dancer…'
Alannah stared at Ashton silently, caught by surprise.

Ashton sat curled up on the sofa in the living room a short while later, hugging his knees to his chest and listening to Edmund and Alannah quietly arguing in the next room.
He could not make out what they were saying, but he could hear both frantic voices speaking over the other.
Ashton glanced up then as Alastair stepped in front of him, placing a cup of tea on the low table before him.
'How are you doing?'
'Oh…thank you I…. I'm ok.'
Alastair gave him a frown, taking a seat on the single cushioned chair beside the sofa.
'I want you to know there is nothing to worry about. Alannah will be fine with this.'
'How do you know?' Ashton sobbed, unable to keep his voice from breaking.
He lifted his hand, furiously wiping away his tears.
'We've been married for many years' Alastair told him. 'We both know each other very well. She is only angry because this has come as a bit of a shock. There is nothing wrong with that sort of thing of course' he added hurriedly. 'Well' he glanced away a little awkwardly then. 'I don't understand that sort of thing but, it would not be right for us to be against something you love to do so much, especially if you have been doing it for as long as you claim.'
Ashton bowed his head, staring at the tea in his cup sadly.

‘Even my own parents don’t know.’
‘They don’t?’
‘Mm…’ Ashton shook his head. He lowered his bare feet to the floor and leaned forwards, taking the teacup carefully.
‘Why?’ Alistair asked simply.
‘I’m supposed to behave a certain way’ Ashton replied, ‘being a lord of purple blood.’
Alastair nodded silently at this. He paused, eyes lowered and mouth open as a thought struck him.
‘Do you have a stage name?’
‘Oh no’ Ashton flushed bright red. ‘Please don’t make me tell you.’
‘You have to tell me now’ Alastair told him with a stern expression. ‘Come on. Out with it.’
‘Hotstuff’ Ashton mumbled, speaking fast before he had a chance to doubt himself.
Alastair threw his head back, barking with laughter.
Ashton stared at him frozen, wide-eyed, unsure of what to make of such a reaction.
‘It was sweet that Edmund tried to protect you like he did, it was sweet that he tried to convince his mother that he had found a new hobby. Lord she must have had a heart attack.’ Alastair leaned back in his chair, lifting his foot and resting it on his knee, arms folded behind his head leisurely. ‘That means he really cares for you.’
‘It does?’
Alastair lifted his eyes to Ashton’s, hesitating then. The was something on his mind, was it doubt?
Ashton felt at that moment that Alastair wanted to say something, but eventually decided against it.
‘How is the tea?’
‘Oh, its lovely thank you’ Ashton said.
‘Just how you like it?’
‘Yes.’
Alastair nodded; eyes boring into Ashton.
‘We want you to feel at home here’ he spoke quietly. ‘I know it must be hard. I was married off by my parents. The first few years were tough, we fought terribly. But once I understood how to handle her….’ He chuckled at that. ‘We’ve been madly in love for years. But it didn’t start off that way. She is a stubborn woman. I think you will have a far easier time with Edmund than I had with my wife.’
‘That sounds so interesting’ Ashton voiced, easing his shoulders slightly. ‘How…. how did you meet? If you don’t mind my asking?’
Alastair was about to answer when the door opened, and Edmund and Alannah stepped in.
Alannah looked stern, but behind her Edmund was smiling widely. He winked briefly at Ashton as he caught his gaze, feeling suddenly nervous.
‘Ok’ Alannah spoke shortly. ‘I want to see what this is all about.’
‘Mother has promised to keep it a secret’ Edmund spoke to Ashton with a grin. ‘But first she wants to see you dance.’

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ashton went to his room to change quickly, getting out of his pyjamas, wearing now a simple t-shirt and comfy trousers.
He went to one of the other rooms, a room that Edmund had shown him previously. An unused room, empty for the most part, save for a few pieces of furniture and some sealed boxes.
Edmund had promised to give this room to him as a late wedding present. He had said to him that they would convert it into a dance studio in time. Ashton was thrilled, but nervous at the same time, now however, he was just scared.
When he entered the room, he found Edmund waiting for him.
'Awww?' Edmund sighed, wearing an expression of disappointment. 'You're not dressed up.'
'Are you kidding?' Ashton hissed to Edmund under his breath.
'But you look great in your outfit and makeup.'
Ashton hunched his shoulders, glancing over towards Edmund's parents who stood a short distance away.
Alastair and Alannah stood side by side now, both staring at him expectantly.
Ashton's heart skipped with nerves, and he suddenly felt sharp pains in his chest.
I can't do this…
'Don't be afraid' Edmund said to him, seeing how scared Ashton was. 'Everything will be alright.'
'But what if they don't like it?' Ashton whispered furiously, teetering on the edge of panic.
'You've come this far' Edmund whispered back, his voice calm. 'You can't back out now.'
Ashton's lip trembled, and he glanced towards Alastair and Alannah again. Their expressions were neutral as they waited patiently.
'What if they tell my parents?' Ashton worried.
'They have promised not to tell a soul' Edmund assured him. 'I know my parents' Edmund continued. 'I trust them completely.'
Ashton frowned again, looking towards them once more.
They continued to look back, both unmoved, both with faces unreadable.
'Please don't cry' Edmund whispered, brushing the tears away that began to run down his face.
'I'm just so scared.'
'Don't be. You trust me, don't you?'
'Yes.'
Edmund placed his hands upon his shoulders then, leaning forwards and kissing him briefly on the lips before whispering playfully into his ear.
'Then dance…my beloved husband.'
Ashton's eyes were wide as Edmund stepped back, turning and walking briskly away.
Ashton took a deep breath, hearing suddenly music playing. Glancing around he saw that Edmund had placed a small speaker on the floor, linked to the music he played on his phone now.
He played Adam Lambert, For Your Entertainment.
Ashton could not help but feel a shiver of excitement coursing through him, despite his fears.
He looked towards the pole that had been fixed in place already, kicking off his shoes quickly.
Why pick this song….? Edmund you jerk…

He ran towards the pole then, letting his worries melt away as allowed himself to be consumed by the music, leaping and grabbing the pole and swinging around, legs spread wide as he turned his body around, staring up at the ground, upside down now. He felt a physical electricity coursing through his body as he danced, nothing else mattered anymore.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ashton was panting, he could feel his body hot now beneath his clothes. Normally he would be wearing his outfit for dancing, it showed more skin but…now.
Ashton glanced over towards the others, towards Edmund and his parents, his chest still rising and falling sharply.
The music had stopped now, and silence echoed throughout the room, a ringing and uncertain silence.
Ashton diverted his gaze, holding his hands together, shoulders hunched.
It was Edmund's father who was the first to speak.
'Well' he began. 'He's very good at it anyway.'
Alastair glanced sideways towards Alannah. He wanted to know what she made of all of this.
'You can't deny that he's very talented to be able to…' Alastair trailed off, 'do all of *that'* he finally finished.
'Well' Alannah voiced at last. 'Its…not what I was expecting.'
'I-it wasn't?' Ashton fumbled.
'No. But to be honest, I don't know *what* I was expecting. It's not…'
'Not what?' Ashton asked nervously.
'It's just different' Alannah spoke levelly.
'Pole dancing is often misunderstood' Ashton spoke hastily. 'It's not about sex or anything like that. It's an art. It's…...'
Ashton broke off, unsure of how best to explain it.
'It's uh…' Ashton glanced away.
'You must be incredibly fit to be able to lift your body up like that' Alannah told him.
Ashton bowed his head, holding his hands behind his back now.
'I've…been practicing for years. This is my passion.'
'You've been practicing for years in secret?' Alannah questioned.
'Yes…'
'Not even your parents know?' Alannah said.
'No. I'm…. scared of what they would say. No one in my family knows…save for my sister.'
Alannah and Alastair shared a glance. Something passed between them.
'Who else knows?'
'My dancing instructor, and her two daughters, and my friend, Lucille. He's a good friend of mine.'
'A boy?'

‘Yes. Pole dancing is not just for girls.’
‘Hmm.’
Alannah unfolded her arms.
‘This is all very out of place’ she said.
‘It’s just a hobby’ Ashton flushed awkwardly, ‘nothing more. Um…it’s just dancing. It’s nothing to do with anything physical…oh gosh I’m not good at explaining this.’
‘Just calm down’ Alannah said to him, her voice tender now. ‘I think I understand. I don’t know anything about this sort of thing but…if this is something you enjoy doing then…’
She faltered for a moment.
‘We won’t tell anyone else about your dancing’ Alannah said. ‘It can be our little secret.’
As she spoke, beside her Alastair was smiling and nodding approvingly, and Edmund was smirking.
‘I told you there was nothing to worry about’ Edmund said to Ashton. ‘My parents are understanding. They will keep this a secret, won’t you guys?’
‘Yes Edmund’ Alannah spoke flatly, raising an eyebrow.
Edmund turned his head towards Ashton, a sly expression upon his face.
‘That was flawless’ he told Ashton.
Ashton couldn’t help but blush upon hearing this, averting his gaze.
Alannah suddenly let out a light-hearted chuckle, moving across the room and towards the door, Alastair following her.
‘This can be your room now’ Alannah said, pausing as Alastair moved past her, stepping through the door. ‘You can practice and dance and…do whatever it is that you do’ she finished. ‘You won’t be disturbed here.’
It seemed for a moment that she was going to say more, but wasn’t sure of what to say.
In the end she simply smiled, turning and walking away.
Once they were gone, Edmund approached Ashton, reaching out to him and caressing his shoulders.
‘Now’ he began, ‘I think you should go.’
‘Go?’
Edmund reached into his pocket, taking something out.
‘My phone!’
Edmund grinned at him. ‘I need you to be by yourself for a few hours.’
‘What? But why?’
‘I bought a bunch of stuff online. As a present for you. I want to convert this room into a dancing studio for you. It was supposed to be a surprise but…’ he glanced away, ‘that didn’t work out.’
‘Oh my gosh…’ Ashton breathed.
‘Now go’ Edmund shooed him away briskly then with a grin. ‘You probably want to call your parents or something. I might be a while. I want this room to be finished the next time you come back.’

Ashton left the room feeling nervous and excited, and feeling several other emotions he was unable to identify.
He hurried upstairs, finding a quiet and secluded part of the house. He lingered her for a moment, clutching the phone to his chest before looking down at it.

He decided to call his sister first.
‘Ashton?!’
‘Hey Alicia’ Ashton smiled, tears of joy and relief trickling down his face.
‘Where on earth have you been? I’ve been calling and texting you for days!’
Ashton felt his stomach flip over, and he scratched his palm nervously as he began to sweat.
‘I…. lost my phone. Sorry.’
‘Oh for heaven’s sake’ Alicia scolded. ‘Well I’m glad you’re ok. You are ok right? Mum and dad told me you moved. I only found out yesterday. Can you believe it!?’
She was clearly angry at this, but Ashton could only smile, feeling overwhelming joy at finally hearing his sisters voice.
‘Ah…’
‘What? Ashton? Are you ok?’
‘Sorry’ Ashton chuckled, ‘the words kinda got stuck in my throat. I’m ok, I’m great. And yes, I live with Edmund now. It was sudden and unexpected but…he’s been taking good care of me and…I'm happy.’
‘Are you? I hope so. I was so mad when I heard that you had moved away, I wasn’t even told! Honestly our parents can be so irresponsible sometimes.’
‘Oh, it’s not their fault’ Ashton mumbled, smiling as he lifted his hand, scratching at a bit of dust on the wall. ‘They don’t mean to be…. you know they’re always like that.’
‘Yeah I know. I’m just protective of my bother that’s all.’
‘Alicia I’m older than you’ Ashton chuckled.
‘So?’
Ashton laughed again lightly to himself, leaning back against the wall and hugging himself.
‘How are the children?’ he asked her. ‘How is your husband?’
‘My husband is fine, and the twins are doing great…’
Ashton listened silently as Alicia began to excitedly rant on, speaking about her babies at great length before going off on a tangent.
Ashton spoke briefly here and there, but for the most part he listened.
It felt so good to be able to hear her voice again, and to speak to her, even if she wasn’t close by. He was glad to have his phone back.
He had spoken with his sister for over an hour, before she finally had to leave. She and her husband were going out together, and Alicia reluctantly said her goodbyes to Ashton.
Ashton lowered the phone once she was gone, smiling to himself.
He looked down at the screen, lifting it again and scrolling through the phonebook.
He called his parents now, lifting the phone to his ear and waiting nervously, hearing the dial tone.
After a long time of ringing his father finally answered.
‘What?!’
‘Hey dad.’
His father gasped loudly on the phone; Ashton heard him call out to his mother.
‘Maya! Maya it’s Ashton, our long-lost boy!’
Ashton sighed wearily, smiling now with a distant look in his eyes. He heard a scream in the background of the call, and a loud crash. Continuing to listen silently he waited a little nervous now, but soon enough his mother came to the phone.
‘Baby?’
‘What?’

‘Oh my gosh!’ Maya sobbed now, crying hysterically down the line. ‘My little baby boy has finally reached out to us!’
Ashton suppressed a sigh, eyes rolling to the ceiling. He lifted the phone back to his ear smiling. ‘I’ve missed you guys’ he said. How have you been?’

After talking to his parents for a time, the call was abruptly cut short because…. honestly Ashton didn’t quite catch the reason, but he heard a loud alarm in the background, and his parents quickly cut the call. Ashton dipped his head, scrolling through the phonebook once more.
He made a third call. This time it was picked up after only the first ring.
‘Ashton?’
It was Sophia, one of the daughters of his dancing instructor, and one of the few people who knew his secret, and one of the fewer people who practiced with him. ‘Where on earth have you been?! We’ve all been so worried when you stopped turning up…we couldn’t reach you.’
‘I’m fine’ Ashton fumbled, trying to speak quickly. ‘I promise.’
Ashton heard another voice as the phone was snatched away from Sophia.
‘Ashton is that you?’
‘Hey Christa’ Ashton smiled.
‘Oh my gosh! Lucile!’ Christa cried out. ‘Lucile! Ashton is on the phone!’
Ashton was put on loudspeaker then, and he couldn’t stop himself crying tears of joy as he heard Lucile’s voice.
‘Ashton is it really you?’
It felt wonderful to hear his voice again.
‘It’s me’ Ashton breathed back. ‘I’m so happy to hear all of you.’
‘Ashton it’s not been the same without you’ Christa said, ‘what happened?’
‘I got married. I live with my husband now.’
‘What?’ Lucile gasped, unable to keep the shock from his voice. ‘You moved?’
‘I uh…’
‘Does that mean we won’t see each other again? Are you not practicing with us anymore? Michelle will be so sad, she’s a great teacher and… well we’ll all miss you…’
‘Oh Lucile’ Ashton mumbled feeling his chest tighten then. ‘I will see you guys again.’
‘You better’ Sophia interjected. ‘I won’t let you just leave all of us like this.’
‘I’m sorry’ Ashton fumbled. ‘It just…sort of happened…’
‘You’re coming back, aren’t you?’ Lucile spoke up, his voice full of worry. ‘Right?’
‘I’m sure I will sometime’ Ashton answered seriously. ‘I won’t just forget about you guys.’
‘You better not’ Sophia snapped. ‘I would never let you, and I am so mad you just left.’
‘Calm down Sophia’ her sister told her, ‘don’t scare him away, I’m just glad he called us all.’
‘I’m not going to let you get away with this’ Sophia continued. ‘You have to dance with us again.’
‘That’s right’ Lucile’s voice said down the line. ‘I’ve missed you so much, it’s not the same without you.’
Ashton brushed the tears from his eyes, willing himself to stay in control.
‘I’m so glad to hear all of your voices….’ He breathed.

Once Ashton finally ended the call, he stood there silently for the longest time, leaning back against the wall and grinning widely to himself like a fool.
He felt so good, fulfilled. Everything was ok.
Ashton pushed himself off the wall, looking casually about him as he slipped his mobile back into his pocket. He began to wander the halls of the manor, familiarizing himself further with this new environment, his new home.
It wasn't such a bad place it seemed.
He had only been walking for about ten minutes, looking through the windows, admiring the paintings and ornaments on the shelves, when his phone began to ping.
He took it from his pocket, seeing a new message there.
Edmund wanted him to go back to the room.
Ashton pocketed the phone and turned on his heel, marching away.
When he reached the room again, he was blown away. In no time at all it seemed, the room had been cleared of clutter, cleaned, the mirrors put up covering the entire wall on one side of the room. Edmund had put up a curtain to cover the wall opposite the door, blocking out the sun that shone through the large window. The curtains were thick and heavy, holding back all the light. Instead the room was lit with tall lamps, each placed in the corners of the room, they were all synced together, and faded from one colour to the next, pink, deep blue, fiery red. It created a beautiful ambience. Even on the walls Ashton could see there was something added. Three large pictures hung at intervals. These were silhouettes of pole dancers in dramatic poses, all male, with brightly coloured backgrounds.
Ashton's hand went to his mouth as his breath caught in his throat, and he gazed about the room in awe, taking it all in.
'Well?' Edmund gleamed, standing in the middle of the room with his hands behind his back.
'What do you think?'
'I uh…. oh wow.'
'Speechless?'
Ashton could only smile at Edmund silently, unable to express himself further.
'It's…really nice' Ashton was able to say at last.
'I have something else for you' Edmund said.
Ashton felt a nervous twinge in his stomach.
'What…what is it?'
Edmund leant forwards; eyes gleaming slyly.
He moved his hands in front of him now, showing what he had been hiding behind his back.
'I was thinking maybe you could wear it. I was thinking maybe you could dance for me…give me a private.'
Ashton looked at what Edmund presented to him now. It was a two-piece item of clothing, similar to the sort of thing he would wear while pole dancing. It was acid-green in colour, and of a leopard print-pattern. The top piece was designed to leave one shoulder bare.
'Oh wow' Ashton said again, unsure of what else to say and feeling a little lost. 'It's quite something.'
'It should be your size' Edmund told him. 'Its stretchy material so it should fit.'
'No, it will fit' Ashton said examining it further.
'Do you like it?'
'Uh. Yes.'
'What's wrong?'

‘Nothing’s wrong’ Ashton smiled. ‘I’ve just I’ve never dressed in this pattern before.’
‘First time for everything eh?’ Edmund winked.
Ashton averted his gaze. Blushing slightly.
‘I think you should try it on’ Edmund suggested with a smile. ‘I want a private showing…. like you did before….’

Ashton dressed, wearing now the gift that Edmund had given to him.
It fit very well, close to his figure. Ashton felt very comfortable in it. The leopard print was very beautiful and the material of excellent quality. He still wasn’t sure on the colour however.
‘You look amazing’ Edmund said, as Ashton re-entered the room.
He had left briefly to go and change, much to Edmund’s dismay.
‘Give me some space’ Ashton had said to him, ‘please.’
And so, Edmund had begrudgingly relented, saying how they should be fully comfortable together now that they were married, but Ashton wouldn’t budge on the matter.
So, Ashton went away.
When he returned, Edmund was able to admire him fully.
‘You look so amazing’ Edmund breathed, slowly looking Ashton up and down. ‘Hm.’
‘What?’
‘I like you best in a skirt.’
‘A skirt?’
‘You know’ Edmund said. ‘That thin half-skirt you wear, that light see-through fabric.’
‘Oh, I see.’
‘When you danced for me for the first time…do you remember? I didn’t know it was you…’
Ashton cast his mind back…

Many days prior…

Ashton began to dance, feeling like electricity was coursing through his body. His flowing half-skirt swirling around him as he swung around the pole again and again, contorting his body, twisting his body, the music enveloping his very being. He flipped himself over, upside down now, holding his body straight and parallel to the pole, his legs split, one pointed towards the ceiling, the other towards the floor.
The crowd cheered and whistled for him. Ashton felt so alive. He felt so powerful.
Nobody knew who he really was, not in this disguise, with his wig and heavy makeup, no one could ever have guessed. That made him feel good.
He continued to spin around the pole, faster and faster, turning upside down, righting himself again, moving at impossibly high speeds, his movements flawless, graceful and smooth.
He felt wild, unstoppable.
At the end of his routine, the heavy music pulsing all around him in time with his beating heart and heavy breath, he straightened up, before arching his spine backwards, one hand on the

pole, the other in the air. His false hair falling about his shoulders as his chest rose and fell quickly. He stared up at the ceiling now, gasping, his body trembling slightly with excitement. He felt so how now, his body beginning to sweat. It was hot in this place with all the bodies.
Ashton relaxed at last, stepping away from the pole and lowering his arm.
He took a step forwards, closer towards the edge of the stage, with a flourishing motion from his arms and a low bow, he heard the crowd cheering for him again. His eyes shone bright with pride as he heard his name being called by the loud voice that announced all the dancers, and people began to call out his name.
Hotstuff.
Ashton straightened again, striking a pose as the lights flared all around him. His eyes looked over the crowd, seeing the faces of those in the club, the men staring back at him.
His heart leapt in his chest then as he suddenly spotted someone he knew, a face he recognised.
'Edmund?'
But his voice was lost in the noise. He barely even heard himself.
'Hotstuff!'
Ashton glanced around, noticing someone backstage calling out to him and gesturing him to get off stage. The next dancer beside him ready to take the pole.
Ashton waved to the crowd one last time before turning on his heels and striding away, towards the curtain, as the next dancer stepped forward, passing him by to the sound of renewed cheers.
'What's gotten into you?' said the man, one of the organisers who worked backstage and ran the show, making sure everything went smoothly and as it should. 'Were you spacing out back there? We don't have time for that.'
'Sorry' Ashton mumbled.
'Go wash real quick' the man said to him. 'There's someone who wants a private show from you.'
'A what?' Ashton answered quickly.
'You've done those before' the man, distracted now as he went about his business, trying to organise the next show, checking through papers, calling out to people and making sure everything was ready. 'You know the deal. They can look but they can't touch. If you feel uncomfortable just press the button.'
Every private booth had a hidden button that the dancers could press if they felt uncomfortable in any way. It was rarely pressed, but it was there just for safety and peace of mind. Most of the patrons were well behaved. Some had been known to get a little physical. Luckily Ashton had not experienced this before.
'For the love of all that is good…' Ashton uttered to himself, 'please don't let it be Edmund.'
No one heard him however, the man he had been talking to had already moved on, tapping away at the computer nearby and changing the lights and the sounds that were onstage, for the next performance that was going on.
Ashton pushed his worries to the back of his mind, swallowing the lump in his throat.
He didn't look at the man again, just stepped forwards, frowning to himself, feeling a little uncertain.
He washed himself quickly and changed into fresh dancing clothes, touching up his makeup where it had smudged slightly because of sweat.
He was cool now, and made his way to the private booth for a one on one dance, himself, and a patron.

He had done this only once before, and that time had been fine. He didn't know the man, and he had never seen him again.
This time however….it was Edmund.

*
*

Ashton waited outside the small room, shoulders hunched, hands knitted together.
He furrowed his brow, head dipped as he tried to fight down his nerves.
Blinking slowly, he let out a steady breath, before lifting his head, looking towards the plain door that stood before him.
This was a quieter part of the club, a long hallway set away from the main part of the club where the performances were held. The building was soundproof, and Ashton could hear not a single thing from the rest of the building. No music, no people. But he knew he would be safe if anything went wrong or he began to feel uncomfortable within the room before him. All the private rooms had a 'help button', there were no cameras within the rooms, there were a few within the hallway outside. But within the small private rooms each had a hidden button, a large plate set within the wall, near the dancing pole. If any one of these plates were pressed, a hulking security guard would come storming from the office down the hall. He would sit for hours in his office, watching the cameras and breaking up any fights of scuffles. Just appearing on the scene would cause most to suddenly behave themselves and comply with requests. But for the most part within the club, things were peaceful.
At this moment, Ashton felt glad for the presence of the security man within the building. It was not that he felt unsafe or threatened in any way, it was more of…the comfort…the thought of the security man just being there, in case anything was to happen.
Ashton let out another steady breath to calm himself, blinking slowly.
He lowered his hands, relaxing his shoulders.
Ashton glanced to the floor-length mirror set on the wall beside the door, glancing over himself one last time before entering the room, before going past the point of no return. There was a mirror beside each door, just to check yourself over one last time. Ashton looked astounding. His lean and muscular body, shoulders and belly and legs bare, he was painted in makeup that was scattered here and there, glitter and bright colours, mostly to hide the bruises from his fall from the cliffs earlier.
And his face….
He didn't like being vain, but he thought to himself at that moment, how handsome he looked.
But most importantly.
He didn't look like himself.
Surely Edmund won't recognise me he thought to himself, before gathering himself one last time, and reaching for the door handle.
He opened the door, stepping into the room before he had time to hesitate or doubt himself.
The music within the rooms was always playing, sexy, seductive and with a sick beat.
Ashton walked into the room, stopping and turning his head to the side.
He saw Edmund sitting there, upon the bench at the back of the small room.
Edmund sat leaning forwards, elbows resting on his knees and eyes wide and eager, trailing down Ashton's body, before going up again and looking into his face.

He did not seem to recognise him.
Perfect.
Ashton looked away, as the door swung shut behind him.
He reached for the pole beside him, striking a pose, throwing his head back, his legs straight, back arched. The light material of his long half-skirt sweeping around his ankles.
He lifted his arm, twisting it around the pole slowly, before leaping up, grasping the pole with his thighs, turning slowly around the pole as he raised his free arm, running his hand up his chest, up his neck and through his hair.
He spun around the pole, faster and faster, turning himself upside down, legs split, climbing higher and higher up the pole and he continued to spin around before flipping himself upside down, turning in the air and landing lightly, cat-like on the floor in a crouching positing, before rising again, stroking his chest and belly against the pole again before continuing to dance.
Feeling the music around him, like a physical presence touching his body, he leapt at the pole again, grabbing it and swinging around it, turning upside down and arching his body, looking up at Edmund then still sitting on the bench.
Edmund watched him keenly, never taking his eyes away from him. But he seemed a little agitated, shifting, leaning back, before leaning forwards again, foot shaking.
Ashton tilted his head back, upside down still, he stared above him at the floor, turning slowly now around the pole. His false hair hanging there as he ran his free hand down his chest, holding the pole with his muscular legs now.
He changed positions, lifting his body with ease horizontal to the pole, before turning again and ending the move gracefully, in complete control as he lowered his body to the floor carefully, ending in a perfect split, throwing his head back, staring up at the ceiling now, panting slightly, feeling a little flushed.
He heard movement then, and looked forwards, to see Edmund had risen from his bench, and was approaching him.
Ashton gathered his legs beneath him, rising to his feet, shoulders hunched, hands balled over his chest.
His eyes were wide, and he let out a slight gasp as Edmund stopped before him.
Ashton remained frozen where he stood, leaning slightly back, away from Edmund.
He wanted to speak, but was afraid to do so, afraid that his voice would give him away.
And so, he remained silent.
Edmund continued to stare at him, his eyes hawk-like.
He raised his arms, stepping forwards, closing the space between them. Edmund embraced him slowly, bowing his head, breathing into his neck.
Ashton's eyes were wide as he stared up at the ceiling, feeling lost. His arms limp by his side.
Edmund spoke then, speaking Ashton's name, the only one he knew him as.
'Hotstuff. That is your name isn't it?'
Ashton did not speak, feeling his heart pounding against his ribcage.
Oh please, help….
Edmund drew back, but did not let go of him.
'What is your real name?' Edmund whispered. 'I have to know who you are. I…. oh my god…' he whispered, 'your dancing is absolutely beautiful. I love your dancing, you're so beautiful, your body is so flawless. I have to know who you are. I want to know your real name.'
Ashton began to tremble slightly, tears of fear brimming in his eyes.
He drew a shuddering breath.

Edmund tilted his head.
'What's wrong?' he asked, letting go of him, 'are you shy? I don't mean to scare you.'
Ashton swallowed nervously, trying to control himself.
'I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. I just…I had to speak to you alone. I had to…I just……want you to myself.'
'Hm?' Ashton managed to utter; his voice feeble.
'Why don't you speak?' Edmund asked.
Ashton said nothing, but continued to stare at Edmund, body tense, like a rabbit trapped in headlights.
Edmund stepped forwards again, hands slipping around Ashton's body for the second time, but this time with a little more force.
Ashton was about to speak at that moment, but was cut off, as Edmund began to kiss him.
His heart twisted in his chest.
'Hotstuff' Edmund whispered in his ear, breaking away from the kiss briefly. 'Tell me your name' he uttered. 'Tell me your name…' Edmund bowed his head, kissing Ashton's neck, trailing his tongue further up his skin, biting his ear lightly.
Ashton flinched at this, drawing a sharp intake of breath between his teeth.
He let out a gasp as he felt a touch between his legs, as Edmund caressed Ashton.
Ashton tried to pull away from him then, reaching for the 'help' button.
But Edmund grabbed him by the wrist, continuing to kiss him.
Ashton stepped back, allowing Edmund to advance on him. He was trapped now, between the wall and Edmund. His eyes were wide, and his mind blank.
Help me…what do I do….?
'Tell me your real name' Edmund whispered between kisses. 'Tell me your name'
Ashton let out a sob, his knees weak and shaking, he was unable to hold himself up.
Ashton collapsed on the floor, legs folded either side of him as he whimpered, biting his fist.
Edmund stared down at him in shock, eyes wide.
For the longest time, he didn't know what to do, so just stood there.
After a few moments, Ashton had somewhat controlled himself, and reluctantly looked up at Edmund, eyes pleading.
He met his gaze, Edmund held his stare for a time, before lowering himself to the ground slowly, kneeling before Ashton.
'I'm sorry Hotstuff' he whispered to him. 'I didn't realise you were so…' he broke off then, swallowing uncertainly. 'I didn't realise…. I thought you were….' He broke off again for a moment before speaking again. 'You were so wild and bold on stage; I didn't realise you were like this.'
'Why are you doing this?' Ashton finally said, breaking his silence. 'Why are you doing this?'
Edmund gave a small start, staring at Ashton with a peculiar expression, his attention fixated on him, brow slightly furrowed.
'What did you just say?'
Ashton bit his tongue, glaring at Edmund, feeling suddenly angry.
'What did you just say?' Edmund repeated.
'Why are you doing this?' Ashton said again, this time speaking with more force. 'You are supposed to be getting married!'
Edmund slowly rose to his feet, never breaking eye contact.
'……Ashton?'

Ashton only gritted his teeth, glaring even harder.
'How can you be coming to a place like this?' Ashton hissed, his rage only growing. 'How can you ask for a private showing like this? You're not being loyal.'
Edmund was silent for a moment, before snapping out of his trance, gathering himself.
'Are you serious?' Edmund retorted. 'That's a bit rich. I mean look at you!'
Ashton flushed bright red then, his resolve crumbling.
'How could you be in a club like this, seducing men when you're supposed to be getting married?' Edmund spoke accusingly.
'No, it isn't like that!' Ashton said beginning to panic. 'It's just a hobby. It's an art! It's not supposed to be physical in any way…' Ashton begun to rub his eyes with the back of his hand, smudging his makeup. 'It isn't like that….'
Edmund shifted then, reaching for his back pocket.
Ashton fell silent, glancing up at Edmund, wondering what he was doing.
Edmund brought out his mobile, snapping a quick picture of Ashton.
'What are you doing?'
'I want to remember this moment' Edmund replied.
Ashton rose quickly to his feet then, trying to snatch the mobile from him, but Edmund was too quick, whipping it out of his reach.
'What's your problem?' Edmund asked lightly, almost teasingly. 'Don't you trust me?'
Ashton gritted his teeth, angry, hurt and confused. He didn't know what to do.
Edmund put his mobile away quickly, straightening.
'You look absolutely gorgeous' Edmund spoke to him, 'so fiery. I cannot believe it's really you.'
'Please' Ashton begged him, clasping his hands together. 'Please don't tell anyone about this. Please keep this a secret. You have to. This is my life. I can't let others know…my family….'
He broke off, gritting his teeth as his emotions threatened to overflow.
'Relax' Edmund smirked, his cocky demeanour back again. 'You can trust me. I won't tell a soul.'
'Really?' Ashton gasped, feeling suddenly hope fluttering in his heart.
'Of course,' Edmund winked back at him. 'If you do something for me.'
Ashton felt the hopeful sensation begin to simmer down, a twinge of nervousness within him now.
'Um…w-what?'
Edmund smirked at Ashton then, his look predatory.
'I want to make love to you' Edmund said. 'I want to have you. Right here right now.'

'You were such an awkward virgin back then' Edmund grinned slyly. 'It was so fun breaking you in.'
'Don't' Ashton said quietly. 'D-don't say it like that.'
'Why not?' Edmund asked, straightening now. 'Are you embarrassed?'
Ashton only glared at him in mild annoyance.
'Now don't give me that pouting-face.' Edmund chuckled in amusement.
'I was trying to look angry.'

‘Oh god’ Edmund breathed.
‘What?’
‘You’re so fucking handsome…. you’re so fucking cute…’
‘Hm?’
Edmund stepped forwards, closing the distance between them.
Ashton closed his eyes then, tilting his head back as Edmund kissed him.
Edmund grabbed him firmly now, pulling Ashton’s body to his own.
‘I love you Ashton’ he whispered in his ear. ‘I love you…’

Chapter Twenty-Four

Edmund knelt before Ashton, head moving back and forth, one hand grasping Ashton’s buttock, the other wound around his thigh.
Ashton leant back against the wall, shoulders tensed as he gasped, the faintest whimper slipping from his lips.
Edmund glanced up at Ashton, eyes fluttering up towards his face.
‘Edmund’ Ashton moaned, as Edmund began to lick the tip. ‘D-don’t stop.’
Edmund grinned slyly, opening his mouth wider then continuing. He began to say Ashton’s name, repeating it over and over, his voice muffled.
Ashton gritted his teeth in pain now, as Edmund moved his hand downwards, running his nails around his thigh, leaving red marks there upon his skin.
‘E-Edmund….’
‘Mmmmm?’
‘I’m gonna…. I’m gonna…’
Edmund leant back, playing with Ashton now, this time using his hands.
‘Are you close?’ Edmund whispered, kissing along his shaft gently, fingers teasing the tip. ‘Are you close?’
‘Uh…. y-yeah…’ Ashton moaned.
‘Then maybe I should stop now.’
‘What?’
‘Maybe I should stop. What? You want to finish? Is that why you look so sad. Beg me Ashton…beg me. I want you to beg for it.’
‘Please’ Ashton moaned, his voice wavering now.
It felt so good, so intense, almost like the pleasure was too great, but he didn’t want it to stop, not now.
‘Edmund…’ his voice cracked now as Edmund began to rise to his feet, turning to walk away, grinning and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. ‘Please don’t do this….’
‘You like my mouth around your cock?’

Ashton let the back of his head gently touch the wall now, as he stared up at the ceiling, cheeks flushed, chest rising and falling.
‘Please don’t leave me like this…’
‘Not so shy now are you?’ Edmund teased, turning back to him. ‘You want me to finish you? Then call me Daddy…’
Ashton started then, eyes wide and lips trembling.
‘Too soon?’ Edmund chuckled lightly. ‘Maybe we can save that sort of talk for later. Hm?’
‘Ahh….’
‘Call me master…’
‘Please master…please…’
‘Well that didn’t take long’ Edmund smirked moving closer to Ashton again. ‘You didn’t even hesitate.’
‘You’re so good at this’ Ashton gasped, looking down at Edmund as he knelt before him once more. ‘How much practice have you had?’
‘You really want to know?’ Edmund answered, grasping Ashton lightly again and beginning to lick him. ‘You really want me talking about something like that.’
Ashton didn’t answer, he just let out a moan again, turning his head to the side.
‘Edmund…oh…. *Edmund*…’
He let out a final moan then, hearing Edmund coughing suddenly.
Edmund did not pull away, instead held Ashton to him harder, nails digging into him.
Ashton gasped deeply now, body trembling slightly.
After a few moments, Edmund swallowed deeply, not wasting a drop.
He rose again, standing before Ashton and sweeping his hair back in a way that made Ashton’s heart skip a beat.
‘You taste so good’ he breathed, attention sliding down Ashton’s body, lingering around his middle, moving down to his legs, before moving up again, towards his chest and face.
‘What a perfect prize.’

Shortly after, Ashton left what was now his room, heading to the nearest bathroom to change back into his regular clothes. When he returned to the dancing studio, he found Edmund still here.

Edmund was kneeling on the floor now, hunched over.
Ashton let the door swing shut behind him, but Edmund did not react. Edmund only continued, gasping lightly before letting out a long low moan, sitting back on his heels then and tiling his head towards the ceiling. Ashton knew suddenly then what Edmund had been doing. He had spilled himself over the floor.
In Edmund’s other hand was his mobile.
‘What’s that?’ Ashton asked flatly.
Edmund turned his head towards Ashton with a smile, his cheeks flushed slightly.
‘I couldn’t resist’ he breathed. ‘I…. am so insanely attracted to you.’
Ashton stepped forwards, approaching Edmund. His eyes flittered down to the screen on Edmunds phone, the phone lay in his hand now, resting on the floor.
Ashton saw a photo of himself, the photo that was taken, now what felt like a lifetime ago.

'Tell me your real name' Edmund whispered between kisses. 'Tell me your name'
Ashton let out a sob, his knees weak and shaking, he was unable to hold himself up.
Ashton collapsed on the floor, legs folded either side of him as he whimpered, biting his fist.
'How could you be in a club like this, seducing men when you're supposed to be getting married?' Edmund spoke accusingly.
'No, it isn't like that!' Ashton said beginning to panic. 'It's just a hobby. It's an art! It's not supposed to be physical in any way…' Ashton begun to rub his eyes with the back of his hand, smudging his makeup. 'It isn't like that….'
Edmund shifted then, reaching for his back pocket.
Ashton fell silent, glancing up at Edmund, wondering what he was doing.
Edmund brought out his mobile, snapping a quick picture of Ashton.
'What are you doing?'
'I want to remember this moment' Edmund replied.

'I couldn't help myself' Edmund laughed, putting himself away, though he still remained on his knees. 'I just can't resist you.'
Ashton got a tissue from his pocket, quickly wiping the floor.
'Edmund…...'
'What?'
Ashton hesitated then, unsure of what to say.
'I….'
'Why do you insist on leaving the room to get changed?' Edmund asked him. 'Are you uncomfortable around me?'
'No, it's not like that. I'm still getting used to….um….' Ashton dipped his head, his words trailing off.
Edmund watched him for a moment longer, before looking towards the floor also.

Later that day, when evening came, Ashton had a bath. It was a shared bathroom, just his and Edmunds, and was only accessible from inside their shared bedroom.
The thing was, it didn't have a lock on the door. Edmund just walked in.
'Ed… what are you doing?'
'Nothing' Edmund grinned. He paused then. 'Did you just call me *Ed*?'
Ashton flushed a little, averting his gaze. He lowered himself slightly more in the water, hiding his body beneath the bubbles.
'Are we calling each other pet names now?' Edmund teased, striding towards Ashton boldly, kneeling on the ground beside the bath. 'My little…...*cupcake*.'
Ashton went even brighter.
'Oh no don't' he mumbled into his hands, hiding his face now. 'Don't call me that. It's embarrassing.'
'Don't be silly' Edmund purred, tilting his head and flashing him a grin. 'My dear husband.'
He slipped his hand into the water then, grasping Ashton lightly, causing him to flinch, caught by surprise.
'Edmund! What are you….?'
'Shhh' Edmund whispered, moving closer and kissing him on the lips. 'Just relax.'

Edmund played with him lightly, fingers teasing him, distracting Ashton with a kiss, and silencing him with his tongue.
Edmund began to move his hand up and down, slowly at first. Ashton broke away from the kiss, grasping the edges of the bath on either side.
His body began to tremble.
'Does that feel good' Edmund whispered to him, leaning closer to whisper in his ear.
'Yeah….' Ashton's voice broke as he spoke then. 'Y-yeah it…...aahh.'
Edmund stopped then, pulling back and rising to his feet, offering his hands out for Ashton to take.
'Stand up' he smiled warmly down to Ashton.
Ashton hesitated only briefly, before rising slowly to his feet, the bathwater running down his body as he stood. He stood completely naked in the water, stepping over the bath and onto the backroom floor, taking Edmund's hand that was offered to him and following him into the next room.
Ashton allowed himself to be pushed back gently onto the bed, taking a deep and steady breath as Edmund bore over him. Ashton parted his legs, heart skipping in his chest as he heard Edmund unzipping himself.
He pushed into Ashton gently, his rhythm gentle but firm, and without pause.
They played on the bed for a time, before falling asleep in each other's arms, Ashton still naked, lay on his side with Edmund behind him, hand resting on his bare hip.
The room was warm, and Ashton slept deeply, undisturbed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ashton stayed with Edmund. Days passed and gradually, a little at a time, Ashton began to feel more at home at this new place. Edmund's parents were kind, Edmund himself was turning out to be a good husband, Ashton would even go so far as to say that he was genuinely falling in love with him.
'You're so mellow now' Edmund grinned, leaning forwards on the garden table in the small courtyard.
There was a wooden trellis set close to the table on one side, enveloped in ivy that wound around, hiding them from view, giving them some privacy. The leaves bobbed lightly in the gentle breeze. And the sun overhead was warm and comfortable.
'You've changed a lot as well' Ashton grinned back to his husband.
'Oh?' Edmund raised his eyebrow playfully. 'How so?'
'I'm not afraid of you running off anymore.'
'What do you mean?' Edmund sounded baffled now.
'Going to clubs and messing around…' Ashton said curtly, turning his head away and sniffing in distain. 'I couldn't trust you back then.'
'And you trust me now?'

Ashton closed the book that rested on his lap, placing it on the table and pushing it aside before reached towards Edmund, weaving his fingers with Edmund's.
'I'm glad' Edmund beamed, before laughing awkwardly to himself. 'It still feels strange to have a different last name.'
When they were married, Edmund had taken on Ashton's last name. Ashton's family were more affluent than Edmunds, and so Edmund had been the one to change his name.
Edmund was no longer called, Edmund Rodrigo Quartz, but Edmund Rodrigo Miles. Ashton had remained as he had been before, as Ashton Lucius Miles. Edmund was now integrated into Ashton's family now, legally married, legally having changed his last name. He would now gain all the benefits that Ashton did.
'I'm happy' Ashton said with a smile.
'Me too' Edmund grinned back. 'And you don't have to worry about me running off. I would never do that.'
'Same here' Ashton giggled sheepishly, blushing slightly.
'I love it when you get like that.'
'Like what?'
'All awkward and shy.'
'Ah.' Ashton drew his hands back now, covering his face suddenly. 'Please don't…'
Edmund only chuckled lightly, shaking his head.
'We should plan for our honeymoon' Edmund said a few seconds later, quickly changing the topic.
'Honeymoon?'
'What? Did you forget?' Edmund laughed. 'A honeymoon usually follows a wedding doesn't it.'
'Oh wow. I um…. didn't really…. yeah, I guess I did forget. S-sorry.'
Ashton averted his gaze, looking to the ground at his feet, before glancing back towards Edmund.
Edmund was looking at the book that Ashton had been reading.
'There is a prophecy among the deer. One day a fawn will be born with the mark of an oak leaf upon his forehead' Edmund read the blurb aloud. 'His courage will lead the deer to freedom; his strength will defeat their greatest enemy. Hm. Is it good?'
'So far' Ashton smiled. 'I…. only just started reading…. it's very well written though.'
'Hm' Edmund said again. 'So where would you like to go on our honeymoon?'
'Oh, I don't know.'
'Anywhere?'
'How about Indonesia?' Ashton suggested.
'Why there?'
'I think it's a beautiful and unique place' Ashton grinned. 'My parents have been there several times. I've seen lovely photos.'
'You've never been yourself?'
'No' Ashton shook his head sadly. 'They went there for work purposes. It wasn't a holiday or anything like that.'
'Oh, I see. It's weird for me to imagine them working' Edmund added in a mumble. 'What do they do for work?'
'They said they're ghost hunters.'
'Say what?'

‘I don’t know’ Ashton blushed slightly. ‘Um…. I think they work with a large company doing…. I don’t know’ he said again. ‘Whatever they do, they are both very successful, and can act professional when they have to so…. we’ve always been well off for money. They’ve done very well.’
‘Oh, I see’ Edmund said. ‘Well that’s good.’
‘My sister doesn’t work’ Ashton went on. ‘She’s a fulltime mum, and she is very happy. I… have wondered often what I would do when… you know… um…... if ever came the time I had to work. I’ve never really known what I wanted to do for work, my mind has never committed on any one thing. The only thing I want to do is dance but…. I don’t know if I can make a career out of it.’
‘I don’t see why not?’
‘Maybe it wouldn’t be appropriate’ Ashton mumbled.
‘Don’t say that’ Edmund protested. ‘Find what you want and do it. No matter what it is, I will support you.’
Ashton stared at Edmund hard then, blinking back tears.
‘Now’ Edmund continued, hastily changing the subject. ‘Let’s not talk about work and our future just yet. There will be time for that later. I’m more concerned about our honeymoon. I need a good holiday. Tell me what Indonesia is like. What you know of it at least.’

They talked for a long time afterwards, their conversation flowing freely.
After a while as the day began to wear on, Edmund’s parents joined them.
‘I hope we are not interrupting’ Alannah spoke up, taking a seat at the garden table, Alastair joining her took a seat opposite from her.
They sat at four points now, with both married couples each facing their partners.
‘I thought this would be a good opportunity to get to know Ashton a little better’ Alannah said turning to face him. ‘Heaven knows you’ve had him all to yourself for all this time.’
‘He is my husband’ Edmund replied shortly, but Alannah cut him off, waving him to be silent.
‘So how are you finding things?’ she asked Ashton.
‘Really good’ Ashton hunched a little embarrassed now at the attention. ‘I…... thank you for being so kind.’
‘Don’t be silly’ Alannah smiled. ‘You’re family.’
Ashton blinked, glancing towards Alastair who was silent, but watched with a smile.
Ashton realised something then. *Edmund’s mother is the one who takes the lead* he thought to himself. *Just like my own parents.*
He felt a warm sensation growing in his chest then.
‘Now you two must be hungry’ Alannah said. ‘I know I am. I hope you don’t mind if we sit out here with you.’
‘Not at all’ Ashton beamed, as Edmund sighed sulkily, resting his chin on his palm.
Food was brought to them shortly after, and they were waited on by the servants of the home. This manor had many, though not as many as Ashton’s own home had before. The servant Ashton had become most familiar with was one called Henry. They were about the same age, and Henry appeared a little awkward and unsure of himself.
Ashton liked this. It made him feel more comfortable. Because he could relate to this.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Days later, and Ashton received a call.
He pulled his phone from his pocket, answering.
His mother was on the line, crying hysterically.
'Mum…...what….?'
From across the breakfast table, Edmund glanced up, concern in his expression at Ashton's tone.
'What?' Ashton said again, his eyes wide. 'Oh my god…'
Edmund put his knife and fork down now, straightening up, continuing to stare at Ashton.
It was just himself and Ashton sitting at the table.
Ashton's hand went to his forehead. He looked dazed. He glanced at the phone then, as if his mother had hung up suddenly.
He turned to look towards Edmund, a croak came from his lips. It was all he could manage.
'What is it Ashton?' Edmund said. 'You're scaring me.'
'M-my grandmother's had a heart attack.'
'What?'
'I have to go home' Ashton uttered, voice breaking as he rose to his feet, pushing his chair back so abruptly it fell backwards.
'Ashton wait!'
But he was already gone, rushing out the room.
'Dammit' Edmund cursed under his breath. 'Henry!'
The servant came hurrying from the kitchen.
'Yes my lord?' he fumbled, using the correct title for one of purple blood.
'You're coming with me. We're leaving.'
'What-?'
'Ashton has a family emergency.'
'Oh' was all that Henry was able to voice before Edmund dashed out, making his way after Ashton.

Edmund found Ashton in one of the other rooms, speaking frantically to his parents about what had happened. His parents both listened silently, their expressions serious.
'I'm coming with you' Edmund blurted, storming into the room.
Ashton turned towards him.
'N-no you d-don't have to…'
'I do' Edmund finished. 'Ashton….' He took his hand gently in his own. 'I won't ever leave you alone.'

Ashton arrived at his old home in a few hours, the driver taking them as quickly as safely possible.
Ashton and Edmund sat in the back seat in silence, both staring out of the window and sitting away from each other.
At one-point Edmund glanced towards Ashton, only briefly, before looking out of the window again.
When they reached the manor, Ashton rushed out the moment the car had stopped, Edmund hurrying after him, and after them, came Henry.
Ashton jogged up the hill towards the home he grew up in, the manor elevated above the rest of the city around.
'Ashton! Wait up!' Edmund called. But Ashton did not listen.
He ran to the front door, bursting in without pause. He found his mother waiting for him in the entrance hall, eyes red with tears.
Ashton ran up to her, embracing her, Maya held him tightly back, enveloping him in the shawl she wore around her.
'Where's dad?'
'He's at the hospital already' Maya replied. 'She's alright. She's alive and stable.'
Ashton could not hold back the sob; his hand went to his mouth as relief washed over him.
'I…. wanted to meet you at home first' Maya said, still holding Ashton firmly as she spoke softly into his ear. 'I didn't want you meeting her alone.'
'I understand.'
Maya looked up at last, noticing Edmund and the servant then. 'Oh. You came too' she said, speaking to Edmund.
'I didn't want to leave Ashton alone.'
'Right' Maya mumbled, dabbing at her eye. 'You'll have to stay here.'
'But…' Edmund began to protest.
'My decision is final' Maya said sweetly, smiling through her tears. 'Come on Ashton. The car is waiting for us.'
She hurried out the door, dragging Ashton with her.
Ashton spared one last glance back towards Edmund, before he vanished from sight, not being given time to even close the front door behind him.
Edmund stared after them, feeling lost and confused.
After a few moments, he walked slowly towards the front door, closing it carefully.
He was alone now; it was just himself and Henry in the large entrance hall.
'Excuse me' Henry spoke up then, 'but…why did you want me to come?'
'It'll probably be a long wait' Edmund mumbled; his voice barely audible. 'I guess…. I just wanted some company…'
Edmund was silent for a moment before speaking again.
'I didn't want you meeting her alone.'
'What?' Henry said.
'Why did she say that?' Edmund uttered, speaking to himself now. 'What did she mean?'

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Time dragged.
Edmund remained in the manor, staring out of the window with glassy eyes.
His attention slowly began to focus as a saw at a distance a vehicle slowing to a stop before the gates.
He blinked; attention fixed on this now. There was another car that followed shortly after, parking behind the first.
It was late now, the sun had set and the sky was dim, the light faded further as the day began to wane.
Edmund saw figures emerging from the two cars. Ashton was one of them, alongside his mother, they had been travelling in the first car.
He saw Ashton pause, looking back towards the second car, but Edmund saw then Maya saying something to him, Ashton seemed to hesitate, before moving away, arm in arm with his mother.
When they were a distance away from the second car, only then did the figure inside emerge.
Helped by another figure who offered her arm as support, the elderly lady carefully got out of the car. Edmund watched the supporting figure, she appeared to be a servant of some kind, perhaps she was a carer. He looked towards the elderly lady now, guessing this to be Ashton's grandmother. She appeared fragile at first as she got out of the car, but Edmund saw her movements were energetic, though she continued to hold onto the arm of the female figure beside her, as another moved towards the car to reach for something, pulling out some bags.
Edmund leant forwards, continuing to stare outside, his eyes dropped then, looking down to the figures of Ashton and his mother heading towards the front door.
Edmund rose swiftly, hurrying down the corridor. Henry who had been standing nearby, eyes closed and head dipped tensed suddenly, glancing around to see Edmund rushing down the corridor. He made his way quickly after him.
Edmund reached the bottom of the stairs as the front door opened, seeing Ashton and Maya enter.
He grinned widely, making a move to step forwards.
Ashton spotted him suddenly, eyes wide and…. alarmed?
He held his hand up to Edmund then in a 'halt' motion.
Edmund pulled back suddenly with a frown, very confused now. Henry stopped halfway down the stairs, seeing this, he remained where he stood.
Edmund watched from a distance as Ashton and Maya spoke together in hushed voices, he was unable to make out what they were saying.
'What's happening?' Edmund whispered to himself.
Ashton tensed then, stepping back as the front door opened again, and in came another figure, the elderly figure.
Ashton's grandmother?

Edmund took a step back, moving closer towards the stairs again, remaining silent and bowing his head. He watched closely.
The old lady was being supported now by Isaac, who towered over her. It was odd to see Isaac and Maya both acting serious. Both focused on the old lady.
Ashton smiled then.
'Grandmother' he said. 'I'm so glad you're feeling better. Is there anything I can get you?'
'Keep your mouth shut' the old lady snapped back, 'and don't touch me. I don't need anything from you.'
The grandmother drew her hand carefully back from Isaac's arm, fully supporting herself now.
'Show me to my room Isaac' she said, as several behind her appeared carrying her bags. 'I need to rest.'
'Of course,' Isaac smiled widely at her, though it was clear that it was forced.
'Food will be available whenever you need it mother.' Maya said to her, smiling. 'There is a servant-bell in your room by the bed. Ring it whenever you need anything, anything at all ok? Ashton will be nearby always to bring anything to you if you need it. I will be speaking to the doctor.'
'No' the old lady barked angrily. 'I don't want him bringing me anything.'
'I understand' Maya submitted, smiling and hunching her shoulders.
'You take me to my room Maya' the old lady said to her daughter in law. 'And you' she said to Isaac who stood beside her. 'Make sure my bags are all brought up with me.'
'Of course,' Isaac bowed his head, speaking with sincerity.
The old lady didn't look at Ashton as she made to walk past him, pausing only briefly as she went, speaking two words to him, continuing to avoid eye contact.
'Filthy child.'
Ashton said nothing, eyes lowering to the ground.
The old lady continued onwards at a shuffle, reaching out to take Maya by the arm as she offered it for support.
Following behind them went Isaac, carrying all her bags himself.
The servants went away. Ashton waited until his grandmother and parents were out of sight. Only then did he look up again.
Ashton glanced over towards Edmund, who remained standing at the bottom of the stairs where he had been before, having not moved at all. He observed silently from a distance everything that had happened.
Ashton smiled at Edmund, but there were tears in his eyes.

Ashton and Edmund went away after that, now it was just the two of them alone together, walking at a gradual pace along the hallways. They headed nowhere in particular.
'My grandmother will be staying with us for a time' Ashton was saying, head bowed and eyes lowered to the ground as he slouched onwards. 'She says she wants her family close at this time. And… I will be staying here too' he added. 'I want to be here if she needs me, or if…something bad happens.'
'She doesn't seem to like you very much' Edmund said.
'She has her reasons' Ashton replied without pause. 'I… it's not something I can help though, and it's not something I can change.'

‘Then what is it?’ Edmund asked, stopping suddenly, tilting his head towards his husband. ‘Why does she hate you so much?’
Ashton slowed to a stop also, averting his eyes. He stared miserably at the floor.
‘Her name is Veronica’ Ashton said, completely ignoring Edmund’s question. ‘She is my grandmother on my father’s side. She is my father’s mother. But my own mother calls her ‘mother’ also.’
‘I see.’
‘She doesn’t like my mother very much’ Ashton mumbled. ‘She doesn’t like Maya.’
‘Why?’
Ashton just shook his head silently.
‘She will be staying here to rest’ Ashton said. ‘There will be a doctor close by at all times to check her heart. Her health is being closely monitored.’
‘Why does she hate you?’ Edmund asked again.
‘I don’t want to talk about it’ Ashton said, turning away. ‘It’s… nothing I’ve done though…. Its….’ He fell quickly silent, biting his lip. ‘Please don’t follow me’ he spoke in a whisper now as he moved away, hunching his shoulders and hugging himself tightly.
Edmund remained where he stood, watching as Ashton walked, heading slowly away from him, and further down the hallway.
He did not try to stop him.

A few moments later, Isaac suddenly appeared.
‘There is a room for you to stay if you want’ he said to Edmund.
‘I’m not leaving Ashton’ Edmund said quickly.
‘I understand.’ Isaac was quiet for a few seconds before speaking again. ‘Another room can be prepared for your servant.’
‘You mean Henry?’
‘So that is his name?’
Edmund glanced up at Isaac, for the first time fully looking at him. Nothing was revealed in Isaac’s eyes.
‘I will go now’ Isaac said turning swiftly away. ‘I have things to do.’
Isaac left him, and Edmund was free to wander the manor, alone.
The next time he saw Ashton, was the next morning at breakfast.

Ashton sat with his head down, keeping his attention fixed firmly on his plate.
Around him at the table sat his parents, Isaac and Maya, and Edmund also. Veronica sat beside her son, eating slowly, her posture stiff as she picked at her food.
The servants kept their distance, appearing only when they needed to, to bring more food or refill an empty glass. Otherwise they stayed away, choosing to remain in the kitchen.
Ashton glanced up briefly, wondering where Henry had gotten to. He had not seen him since yesterday.

The only one who did stay close to Veronica in this time, was her personal servant, and someone she confided in. Her name was Lisa, and she was a young girl. She must have been only around seventeen in age, and was a petite figure. Silent and proud. Her dark hair she wore in a plait, and her clothes were all black. She dressed this way all the time it seemed.
Ashton had seen her before, not very often however, about as often as he saw his grandmother. Not very often.

Now, Maya and Isaac were talking together, the only conversation happening at the table at this time. Ashton continued to keep his eyes down, listening to them only half-heartedly. His attention was mostly set towards the book he read at this time, which rested beside his plate as he ate his breakfast. He continued to listen to his parents talk, noticing their voices were slightly hushed.
They talked about the flowers in the garden now, going on about how well they were doing, then they began to discuss what they should plant next to make the area even more beautiful than it already was. Their talk moved onto the greenhouse now. They wanted a bigger one, with a fountain inside, no, a river, and more tomatoes.
After a few moments, Ashton's attention drifted away from their voices altogether, and he focused fully on his book.
He didn't notice Edmund cast him a nervous glance, he didn't notice his grandmother address him, nor the fact that Isaac and Maya had stopped their discussion now.
Everyone was watching him now.
'Ashton!'
He jumped, glancing up with wide eyes towards his grandmother.
'S-sorry.'
'Are you even listening to me, you worthless brat?' Veronica snapped. 'Stupid child.'
'I'm sorry' Ashton said again, not sure what he had done.
'Have you no manners?' Veronica persisted.
'I…don't understand.'
'Get that book off the table' Veronica ordered him, 'its rude to read at the table. Good grief.'
It seemed like she wanted to continue to berate him but she bit her tongue suddenly, shooting a glare over at Maya.
Maya bit her lip, suddenly looking uncomfortable.
'Uh… Ashton sweetie' Maya spoke tenderly. 'Why don't you put that book away dear?'
'Ok' Ashton replied without resistance. He didn't want to cause any trouble and upset anyone.
Veronica began to speak to Maya as Ashton rose from his chair with the book, moving away to place it in a nearby drawer.
'You should do a better job teaching him manners' Veronica spoke sharply to Maya. 'You've spoiled both of your children. At least Alicia …'
'Now mother would you like more tea?' Isaac interrupted, speaking in a firm but friendly manner, smiling at his mother.
'No' Veronica said, turning to face her son, as Ashton returned to his seat at the table, keeping his eyes down and ignoring everyone at the table. He did not even look at Edmund, who stared at him now, wearing an expression of concern.
Edmund knew how much Ashton liked to read; it was his second favourite thing to do after dancing. He seemed to be doing it a lot more recently, Edmund thought this was perhaps because of his nerves. He was unable to dance, and so he distracted himself with his reading.

Ashton had been reading for hours last night, and since early in the morning before breakfast.
'I need to speak to you both soon' Veronica said to Isaac and Maya. 'Privately. And you too' she added.
'Me?' Edmund said perplexed, realising Veronica was addressing him.
'Yes. I need to speak to you alone. Just you and me, and Lisa of course.'
The servant who stood nearby, met Edmund's glance then, only briefly before looking down.
Edmund shared a look with Ashton, both were confused, and neither knew what to say.

After breakfast, Veronica dismissed Ashton.
He went away alone, wracking his brain as he wondered what on earth his grandmother wanted to talk to Edmund about, and his parents also. It came as no big surprise however, that she did not want to include him.
And so, Ashton wandered by himself, carrying his book in his hand. His meandering path took him outside, through the garden.
It was a pleasant day, but there was a chill in the air. Ashton decided to head to the greenhouse, a large building filled with lush vegetation that made it look more like a jungle from the inside than anything else.
Ashton found one of his favourite spots near the entrance, a low and comfortable seat, behind which was a little fountain made of curved stone.
He sat here with his back to the fountain, opening his book. He began to read.

It was maybe about three hours later when someone finally found him. Ashton glanced up, hearing movement, and saw Edmund approaching him with a weak smile.
'I had to look around for you a little bit' he said to Ashton, 'um…I asked your parents where you might be when I saw that you weren't in your room. Um…. they listed a few places, your favourite places they said.' Edmund laughed awkwardly at that, scratching the back of his head and averting his eyes. 'It seems they know you quite well.'
'Well they are my parents' Ashton smiled, closing the book and placing it to the side of him. 'I love them both very much, and they love me.'
'Yeah I know' Edmund nodded. 'Not everyone is so lucky…so…' he trailed off then. 'Not that I'm saying anything negative about my own parents' he added hastily. 'It's just you know, in the news and stuff, you hear bad stories and…you know.' He trailed off again, shoulders slumped.
'Is everything alright?' Ashton voiced with concern.
'Of course. Why wouldn't it be?'
'Well um…' Ashton shifted awkwardly. 'What…what did my grandmother want to talk to you about?'
'Nothing.'
Ashton hesitated.
'Oh, come on, it must have been something.'
'It was nothing.'
Ashton frowned at him, unconvinced.
'You um…. don't trust me?'
'I love you Ashton.'

‘Hu?’
‘I just want you to know that.’
Ashton stared at him dumbfounded for a few seconds.
‘I…. I love you too.’
Edmund smiled warmly at this, stepping closer to Ashton and kneeling before him. ‘That is the first time you’ve said that to me.
‘Is it?’ Ashton fumbled, going slightly red at this.
‘Yes.’
Edmund reached forwards, grasping both of Ashton’s hands in his own. His attention drifted to the side, towards the book.
‘What are you reading?’
‘It’s called *Fallen Eclipse*.’
‘Is it good?’
‘Yeah, it’s a very strange story but…I’m enjoying it.’
‘What kind of story is it?’
‘It’s a sci-fi, with assassins.’
‘Oh cool’ Edmund replied, frowning in amusement.
‘So, what did you and my grandmother talk about?’ Ashton asked again, hoping for an answer this time.
‘Don’t’ Edmund told him sharply, expression serious now. ‘I told you to drop it.’
Ashton flinched slightly at that, surprised at his harsh tone.
‘S-sorry’ he mumbled, dipping his head.
‘It’s alright’ Edmund sighed, letting go of his hands and rising to his feet. ‘I’m just a little stressed.’
Ashton was about to ask what he was stressed about, but quickly managed to catch himself. He didn’t want to annoy Edmund further, and asking him more questions was likely to just get on his nerves.
‘It’s been a difficult time for everyone’ Ashton settled on saying.
Edmund looked at him. ‘Uh. Yeah’ he said. ‘It uh…. sure has.’
Ashton tilted his head at Edmund curiously, before looking away.
‘Where is Henry?’
‘Oh’ Edmund replied. ‘He’s…talking with, that lady, the servant? What was her name?’
‘Are you talking about Lisa? My grandmother’s servant?’
‘That’s the one.’
Ashton frowned at this. ‘Why are they talking?’
‘Why not?’ Edmund replied quickly. ‘They seem to get along’ he said shrugging. ‘I guess they like each other. You know how some people just *click*?’
‘I guess.’
‘You know’ Edmund went on. ‘Just like how we *didn’t*. Anyway, so now that you’re here again will you be visiting your friends?’
Ashton got the sneaking suspicion that Edmund was trying to quickly change the subject, was quickly trying to distract him. He shrugged this off.
‘Yes. I think that would be a good idea.’
‘That’s great’ Edmund grinned. ‘You should do that. In fact, you should do that right now.’
‘Now?’
‘Yes. No time like the present eh?’

‘But…. What about you?’ Ashton asked a little baffled.
‘What do you mean?’
‘What will you do?’
‘What do you mean?’ Edmund said again. ‘I’ll be here.’
‘You…. Don’t mind if I go?’
‘Why would I? We all need time alone to ourselves, right? I will use mine to think about the future.’
‘Oh. Ok.’
‘You go and meet your friends’ Edmund said to him. ‘I’ll… go for a wander in the garden. Its lovely here anyway, right?’
‘Oh’ Ashton said again, still a little perplexed. ‘Ok.’
As Ashton made to stand, Edmund moved closer to him, kissing him on the lips briefly.
‘I never wanted to take you away from your friends’ Edmund said to him, ‘truth be told I still feel guilty about it.’
‘Oh’ Ashton blurted, flushing slightly, ‘you…don’t have to…’
‘Just go’ Edmund grinned at him, kissing the back of Ashton’s hand before turning away from him to walk out of the greenhouse. ‘I’ll have my phone on me, message me anytime ok?’
‘Oh…. I mean uh…...’ Ashton fumbled. ‘Y-yes. Th-thank you.’
He watched Edmund until he was out of sight, before taking his mobile from his pocket. He texted his friends, Lucile and the sisters Sophia and Christa, and their mother, his dancing teacher Michelle.
They all answered quickly, and Ashton agreed to meet them.
Shortly after this he left the greenhouse quickly, jogging out of the garden and heading to one of the several small gates at the edge of the property. His little secret that still remained. He doubted anyone other than the gardeners knew that these were here, these hidden gates that led out of the property.
Ashton paused only briefly to glance back at his old home, before slipping through the gate, and entering the city once more, like so many times he used to before everything changed.
He headed to the dance studio.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

They were all there by the time he arrived, and Ashton couldn’t help but feel overwhelmed with emotions as he stepped into the studio, seeing them all waiting for him. They all turned to face him as the door swung gently shut behind Ashton, all of their faces broke into a smile.
‘Ashton!’ Christa called out. ‘Oh my god!’
She ran up to him, sweeping him up in her arms and hugging him tightly. Ashton held her back, letting go a few seconds later, tapping her shoulders when he began to run out of breath.
‘Oh gosh sorry!’ Christa fumbled, as Ashton took a step back, gasping and smiling as he rubbed his chest.

‘Girl you nearly suffocated me’ Ashton laughed.
‘Well that would serve you right for leaving us’, Sophia said with her arms folded. ‘I still cannot believe you got married and abandoned us like that.’
‘I didn’t abandon you!’ Ashton protested, as Lucile stepped forwards to embrace him next.
‘I thought I’d never see you again’ Lucile mumbled into his shoulder, unable to control his emotions.
As he stepped back, Ashton saw tears in his eyes. But Lucile just brushed them away furiously with the back of his hand, sharply averting his attention, hoping Ashton would not notice.
‘Ashton’ he heard Michelle cry out excitedly then. ‘It’s so wonderful to have you back!’
She hugged him too, and as he held her, Ashton felt Sophia hug him at the same time.
He held them both together, unable to stop the tears now.
‘I’m sorry I'm sorry’ he sobbed, pulling away from them and turning around, dabbing at his eyes.
‘This must be a lot for you’ Michelle told him warmly, offering him some tissues.
Ashton glanced at her with bleary eyes, taking the tissues graciously and dabbing at his eyes.
‘Thank you so much’ he uttered, not trusting his voice not to break. ‘I um…just got a bit overwhelmed.’
‘You stupid fool’ Sophia said, but as Ashton glanced over at her, he saw her eyes shimmering too, though she continued to glare.
Seeing that he had noticed her tears she snapped at him. ‘It’s rude to stare!’
Ashton could only laugh at her, which made Sophia suddenly blush furiously.
‘Sophia’ Ashton gasped holding his sides. ‘I’ve never seen you look so awkward.’
‘Shut up’ she mumbled, folding her arms and turning away to hide her face. ‘You can be such a jerk sometimes.’
‘Oh Ashton’ Christa sobbed again, lunging for him and holding him again tightly. ‘I’m so glad you’ve finally returned.’
‘Christa I can’t breathe!’
‘Oh gosh sorry!’ she said again, suddenly letting go of him. ‘I’m sorry I'm sorry’ she hunched her shoulders looking mad at herself. ‘I’m just so excited and happy.’
Ashton smiled at her warmly, before glancing over towards Lucile.
Lucile grinned sheepishly back at Ashton, blushing awkwardly and scratching the back of his head.
‘I uh…’ Lucile began. ‘It’s good to have you back. Seriously. I really missed you man.’
‘Me too’ Ashton smiled. ‘I missed you too.’
Michelle glanced to each of them, eyebrow raised, hand on her hip.
‘We should dance’ she voiced then. ‘All of us.’
Ashton glanced towards her, eyes wide with excitement, his body already overflowing with energy simply at the idea.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ashton danced for hours, practicing alongside his good friends, whom he had missed so dearly. They took a break for a short time to rest, before continuing to practice. A few of their routines were performed in a team. Ashton and Lucile paired up together in one routine, sharing the same pole. Ashton below, and Lucile clinging to the pole higher up. They turned slowly together, the beautiful melody of the music flooding the room. Lucile was upside down, Ashton the right way up, they hooked their arms together, continuing to spin, both striking the same pose, mirroring each other in perfect symmetry.
They carefully got off the pole when they had finished their routine. They smiled at each other, both a little out of breath, Lucile a little red in the face from being upside down.
Michelle turned the volume down on the music, though allowed it to continue playing.
'Excellent' she told them both loudly as she clapped heartily. 'That was flawless.'
Ashton and Lucile shared a glance again, Ashton blushing slightly.
'You always were able to pick this up so easily' Ashton said to him.
'Thanks Ashton' Lucile mumbled, shrugging his shoulders and looking away.
Michelle's daughters had both already moved away towards the other side of the room. They were sitting now by their bags, pulling out snacks and drinks.
'We should eat something' Michelle said to Ashton and Lucille. 'We brought food if you didn't have any.'
'Oh' Ashton fumbled, 'I uh… thank you very much.'
'If we had more notice that you were coming back, then we could have thrown a full party or something' Lucile smiled, placing his hands together.
'Oh no, you know I don't like that kind of fuss' Ashton protested. 'If you have any food' he said to his dance teacher, 'then that would be more than enough. Thank you so much.'
'Of course,' Michelle winked playfully. 'There's plenty for you too Lucile' she said to him.
'Great' he smiled thankfully. 'I was starting to get a little hungry.'
'Actually, I did get you something small' Michelle said to Ashton as Lucille moved towards the sisters, going over to sit with them.
'What is it?' Ashton asked a little nervously.
Michelle beaconed him over, and together they walked across the open studio. The group were all together now, sitting close to one another. Michelle reached into one of the many bags that lay nearby, and handed Ashton something.
'It's the best we could find at short notice' she told him, 'but I think it's perfect.'
It was a miniature red velvet cake, make of two tiny tiers, the sponge rich in colour, with cream on top and a single little raspberry.
Ashton looked down at it in surprise as Michelle moved forwards to help him take it out of the box, doing so very carefully so as not to damage the delicate cake.
'Oh my' Ashton breathed. 'It's so pretty.'
'I wanted to get you a little gift' Michelle said to him, as he blinked back his tears, emotions threatening to overwhelm him again. 'But when we saw it in the shop' Michelle continued, glancing back at her daughters with a frown, 'Sophia and Christa each wanted one of their own.'
As Ashton glanced past her, he saw the girls both eating their own little cakes, the same kind as his own he held. Christa was nearly finished scoffing her own, and Sophia was just getting started, eating the rich sponge delicately.
'And of course, I couldn't leave Lucille out' Michelle smirked.

Ashton noticed then that Lucille was holding a little box of his own. He hadn't opened it yet.
'I um….' Lucille began, 'wanted to wait for you. Unlike these two' he glanced disapprovingly towards Christa and Sophia.
They both ignored him, continuing to eat their own cake.
Michelle brought her own box out of her back, smiling at Ashton as she did so. It seemed she couldn't resist getting one for herself.
Ashton let out a contented sigh, unable to keep the great big grin from his face.
He had missed this. He had missed these times, his friends, the dancing in a group. Times were always changing, and he knew things wouldn't stay this way forever, and so made the most of what he had now. Because he knew it would not last.
Some things could never truly go back to the way they used to be.

Ashton returned home much later, only when the sky began to grow dark.
The streets were slowly becoming quieter, as fewer cars drove this late in the day.
Ashton snuck back into his home, like he used to do so many times before. He was sure his parents didn't know what he was up to, and he wanted to continue to keep it that way.
But as he stepped into the entrance hall of the manor, he saw a figure. Ashton breathed a sigh of relief however when he realised who it was.
'Edmund' he gasped. 'What are you doing there? Were you waiting for me?'
'Finally,' Edmund sighed, speaking in a quiet tone so as not to disturb the peace that settled on the home now. 'I thought you might never come back. I was starting to think….'
'What do you mean?' Ashton smirked. 'You think I would run off? You think I would run away from you?'
'No no nothing like that' Edmund shook his head. 'It's normal for me to be a little concerned, though right?'
'That's really sweet' Ashton beamed back at him. 'So, what have you been doing while I've been away?'
'Nothing' Edmund replied. 'Waiting for you.'
Ashton felt his emotions begin to overflow inside him. He dipped his head then, holding his hands together and grinning widely. This day had almost been too much for him, and he shook his head vigorously, forcing himself to get a hold of his emotions.
Ashton reached out to Edmund, taking him lightly in his hands as he cupped his face tenderly. He kissed his lips, leaning further into him, as he did so, Edmund raised his arms, enveloping Ashton in a warm embrace.
'I love you Edmund' he whispered, resting his cheek against his shoulder now. 'I love you so much.'
Edmund looked down at him, blinking slowly.
'Edmund?' Ashton glanced up at him. 'What's up?'
'Nothing. Its just things are a bit…. different right now.'
'Yeah…. I guess they are.'
'Are you ok then?' Edmund asked him, his tone sincere.
'Of course I am,' Ashton gleamed. 'It's great being back. I know it won't last; I know I will have to go home with you again soon but…. it's been so wonderful to meet my friends again.'

Ashton stepped back then, rubbing his eyes furiously.
'Dam I get so emotional sometimes' he mumbled to himself. 'I never could help it. I've always been so pathetic.'
'I don't think you're pathetic' Edmund told him.
'Hu?' Ashton glanced up, surprised. And then he smiled. 'Thanks Edmund.'
Edmund smiled back at him.

The next day, Alicia arrived.
It had been somewhat of a surprise for Ashton, a pleasant one to be sure, but not something he was expecting.
She burst suddenly into the room without warning. Ashton looked up wide-eyed from his book. He and Edmund had been sitting in the conservatory, both reading silently together.
'Alicia? What…?'
He trailed off, rising to his feet swiftly as she hurried up to him, sweeping him up in her arms.
'Ashton it's so good to see you!'
'Alicia' Ashton managed to gasp before she let him go quickly, turning to glance towards Edmund.
'I hope you've been caring well for my brother' she told him curtly, eyebrow raised, one hand still upon Ashton's shoulder as Ashton glanced uncertainly back at Edmund, who was standing now.
'Of course,' Edmund replied boldly. 'What are you doing here?'
'I could ask the same of you' Alicia replied. 'This is a family matter.'
'I came here to be with Ashton. He is my husband after all.' Edmund said, flicking his hair back in agitation. 'And am I not family now that we are married?'
'Hm.' Alicia turned away from him, her expression softening now as she spoke to Ashton again. 'It's about grandmother. I heard. She's been very unwell lately. And we need to talk.'
Her expression dampened then. 'I'm… worried.'
'Worried?'
'You know how I feel towards her' Alicia answered her brother. 'But she is still the head of the family and…. well….to lose her….'
Ashton gasped. 'What? You…. you think…...'
'Don't worry about it' Alicia shushed him quickly then. 'We have to go and meet with her. Mother and father are waiting. They are with her now but Veronica wants to meet with just us.'
'Just us? But….'
'Don't ask why.'
Ashton sighed forlorn, bowing his head.
'Don't worry about it' Alicia reassured him, taking his hand in her own and grasping firmly. 'We'll be together, and I will protect you.'
'I'm the elder' Ashton laughed awkwardly. 'I should be the one protecting you.'
Alicia flicked him playfully on the nose then.
'Hey!' Ashton batted her away.
'Come on' Alicia said to him. 'She's waiting for us. Edmund' she spoke up, looking over Ashton's shoulder to glance to him. 'Wait here.'
'Um. Ok I guess?'

‘Sorry Edmund’ Ashton said to him. ‘This is important.’
‘I understand honey’ Edmund winked at him.
Ashton blushed slightly.
‘Now come on’ Alicia mumbled to Ashton, pulling him along.
Ashton glanced back briefly towards Edmund, before allowing himself to be taken from the room.
Edmund watched them go, now standing alone in the silent conservatory.
He reached for the book he had placed upon the table, sitting back down on the lush seat.
He opened back to his page and continued to read.

Chapter Thirty

The children met with their grandmother. Veronica was cold towards Alicia as she was with Ashton and Maya both. But unlike Ashton and Maya, Alicia would not tolerate or bend to Veronica in any way, and simply acted cold in response. Polite, but stiff. It was a very tense atmosphere for them at the time.
Ashton had explained to Edmund why Veronica disliked Alicia and Maya. This was because back in the day, many years ago when Isaac was still young, Veronica wanted him to marry a particular woman. Everything was organised it seemed, but Isaac had no interest in this woman, instead his sights were set on another. Maya, his mother. Ashton had been told many years later when he was much older that it was love at first sight, from both of them. Something drew them together, and their chemistry blended perfectly it seemed, even before they had exchanged words.
Ashton had been told many years later when he was much older, that they had glanced each other from opposite ends of the room during a party. Isaac had stood there with his fiancé by his side, however paid no attention to her, instead was fixated on this new beauty, as she was fixated on him.
Veronica did not approve of this, and pushed her son to marry the woman she had picked out for him. But on the day of the wedding and in dramatic fashion, Maya had crashed the wedding. It was all pre-planned, and Isaac and Maya both escaped the cathedral with their jetpacks. Yes, they had strategically hidden jetpacks beneath several bouquets of flowers, and no one was any the wiser.
To say that Veronica had been angry would be an understatement. This story always amused Alicia and Ashton when they were told it as young children, and they would ask to hear it often, as they played on the floor with their toys after dinner, Isaac and Maya on the floor with them. Isaac and Maya had hovered above the heads of the bewildered audience as together they professed their love for one another in a dramatic speech. Then they had apparently set off some colourful smoke bombs as a distraction, before making their escape through one of the

higher windows in the cathedral. Maya had told her children excitedly when she would recount the story many years later, that there had been a helicopter waiting for them.
And then the rest is history.
They eloped and when they did finally return to the human world and their families after over a year of being missing, Maya had a little baby girl in her arms. She had named this little treasure Alicia, her beloved firstborn, her daughter, and her world.
Veronica did not approve of this new woman, this marriage nor this child. But Isaac could not be swayed. He loved Maya, and he loved their daughter Alicia.
As for himself, Ashton had never fully explained to Edmund why Veronica disliked him so much. He remained vague about that. Though he did say that it was for different reasons.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ashton returned to the conservatory where Edmund waited for him, and this time he came alone.

Ashton explained to Edmund that he and Alicia would be leaving for a short time, Edmund was alarmed by this, but Ashton reassured him.
'Everything is ok dear' he told Edmund, caressing his cheek tenderly, his smile soft. 'This is just family stuff. Trust me, everything is alright. I just need you to stay here to…. just…. just wait here ok?'
'I want to come with you.'
'Edmund please.'
'Ashton no' Edmund interjected. 'I want to be by your side always, no matter what.'
Ashton had frowned at him, letting out a heavy sigh.
'Fine' he relented. 'Just……fine.'

Shortly after this, Alicia and Ashton got into the backseat of the dark vehicle that would take them to their destination. The driver, a silent young man sat patiently behind the wheel.
'What's he doing here?' Ashton asked Edmund as he entered the vehicle, taking a seat in the spacious area, sitting and facing Ashton.
'Oh' Edmund replied nonchalantly as Henry followed after him, entering the vehicle and taking a seat beside Edmund quietly, admittedly looking a little lost. 'He's uh… here for protection.'
'What?' Ashton blinked.
He and Alicia sat opposite Edmund now, a great distance between them as they both sat by the window. Upon hearing this, Alicia turned away from the outside world, glancing towards Edmund with a raised eyebrow.
'We don't really need any servants right now' she said to Edmund.

‘Now now there’s no harm in bringing him along’ Edmund waved to her. ‘And besides’ Edmund continued, ‘Veronica wants him to come along.’
‘What?’ Alicia started. ‘Why?’
‘Well she would rather her own servant…. Lisa, I think is her name... she would rather Lisa goes. But she doesn’t want to be far from her. The two are quite close apparently, and Veronica needs a lot of care now in her age. And uh, when Henry and Lisa spoke together…...I don’t know…Veronica seemed to like him’ Edmund said, sending a glance towards the young male servant. Henry just hunched his shoulders shyly, averting his gaze. ‘She requested Henry come along, just to keep an eye on things. When she asked me earlier and I said I was going to uh…. you know because I wanted to be with Ashton…’ he glanced towards him, finishing with a shrug. ‘I don’t know’ he ended.
Alicia looked very displeased at this, folding her arms and looking out of the window again. It was clear that she was even more annoyed now than she had been before.
‘Of course she wouldn’t tell us anything’ she muttered angrily.
‘Now come on’ Ashton tried to calm her. ‘She’s just set in her ways. She would probably come with us herself but, you know… she just wants to know how things go I'm sure.’
‘Hmm.’
Alicia seemed to remain unconvinced as she shot a glance towards Ashton, the frown still upon her lips.
‘I will never understand that woman’ Alicia finished.
‘So where are we going?’ Edmund voiced.
‘Just to visit a friend’ Ashton replied, as Alicia had gone back to silently staring out of the window with great displeasure.
‘A friend?’ Edmund repeated.
‘Yeah’ Ashton replied with a noncommitted smile.
‘Uh-hu. And um…. How long is the journey?’
‘At least three hours on a good day.’
Edmund let out a sigh, turning towards the window himself. ‘Great’ he mumbled. ‘At least these seats are comfortable I suppose.’
They waited for only a few more minutes before Isaac and Maya came out to the car, saying goodbye to their children and talking briefly in a cryptic manner.
They need not have bothered anyway, Edmund’s mind was far away, and he wouldn’t have caught onto their words even if he tried. His thoughts were simply too muddled.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The journey was long and boring, and it was after very little time that Edmund began to nod off to sleep, being woken from time to time by the movements of the vehicle.
He was just slipping into a deeper sleep when he was woken by Ashton.

‘Hey, Edmund.’
He opened his eyes, lifting his head and blinking wearily. He saw Ashton before him, leaning forwards to reach him, hand on Edmund’s knee.
‘Ah, you’re awake.’
‘Hu?’
‘You look kinda sweet when you sleep like that.’
‘What?’
Ashton leant back, drawing his hand away.
‘We’re here’ Ashton told him.
Edmund looked around, seeing it was just himself and Ashton in the back of the vehicle now. Alicia was gone, and so was Henry. As Edmund glanced through the window, he saw them both outside, and he saw where they were now.
They had travelled far from the city, far from the manor home where Ashton was raised. Edmund could see they were in the countryside now, a truly beautiful and secluded place, and as he gingerly stepped out from the back of the vehicle, standing at last and stretching, he was able to see clearly the area around him.
Edmund yawned, clearing his throat and glancing about him. He squinted in the bright sun. It was a beautiful and bright and still day, with hardly any clouds in the sky, just a few here and there dotted about, but not enough to block out the sun’s pleasant rays for long.
They were in a very green place now, a garden, much of it was overgrown, but not in an unpleasant way. Everything that surrounded was beautiful, and much of what was around them had been left to grow naturally. Only the areas closest to the modest wooden home were tamed. They stood now on an area of gravel; this is where the vehicle had been parked. The driver was leaning against the bonnet of the car silently, he seemed to be taking in the sun, leaning back with his hands in his pockets.
Edmund started slightly as Ashton took his hand gently in his own.
‘You seem to be lost to the world’ Ashton smiled.
‘Oh. Sorry. I’m just taking all of this in.’ Edmund looked away again. They stood in a shaded patch, above their heads were the gentle swaying branches of the trees that grew either side. As Edmund looked closer, he saw in the trees, apples and pears.
‘The orchard was originally supposed to be at the back of the house’ Ashton told him, ‘but as time went on, it became more…. chaotic.’ he smiled again. ‘I kind of like it this way.’
‘It’s really…. different’ Edmund mumbled, eyes still roving around.
‘Oh, I forgot, you must have spent your whole life in the city, I bet you’ve never really been to the country before have you.’
‘I have been to the country before’ Edmund replied indignantly. ‘Though…’ he admitted, ‘…very rarely.’
‘I’ve visited this place only a few times’ Ashton said, glancing ahead now towards the home that stood a distance before them. Alicia and Henry were already making their way along the winding gravel path towards it. The little wooden structure sat neatly in the centre of the clearing, the land further outwards was wild and untamed, the trees growing taller the further away from the home you could see, and the hills steeper and more treacherous. The home itself, sat on perfectly level ground.
‘I’ve never seen a place like this before’ Edmund breathed, taking his first steps forwards, hand still within Ashton’s.

‘It’s quite something isn’t it?’ Ashton sighed contentedly. ‘I’ve only been here occasionally but…. I’ve always loved it.’
‘Why are we here anyway?’ Edmund questioned.
Ashton turned to face him with a frown.
‘I told you. It was to visit someone.’
‘Who?’
Ashton groaned reluctantly, turning away.
‘Come on’ he said, tugging Edmund along after him. ‘Let’s go.’

It was a strange visit for Edmund, who still had been told next to nothing about the purpose of the visit, and so for the most part Edmund remained silent, simply observing.
When Alicia knocked on the door, they waited only seconds before the door opened. Standing on the threshold was a woman, dark haired and beautiful. She dressed in simple clothes, and wore an expression of both apprehension and excitement.
‘Wonderful’ she smiled widely, eyes landing on Ashton. ‘I um…. come in. He’s uh….in his usual place.’
‘Thank you’ Ashton said, taking the first step into the home, Alicia following after him.
‘It’s good to see you again miss,’ Alicia smiled at the woman, grasping her hands lightly in her own in greeting.
‘As it is you… I mean… it’s good to see you too. Gosh I'm sorry you’ve caught me a little off guard’ she flustered. ‘I was only expecting the two of you.’ The woman glanced towards Ashton, who had stopped now, looking back at her.
Ashton smiled. The woman smiled back, hesitated for a moment, before looking back to Alicia.
‘Not that there is anything wrong with more guests’ the woman added hastily, glancing towards Edmund and Henry who still stood at the threshold of the door, waiting for whatever would happen next.
‘Are you….’ the woman said speaking to Edmund, ‘uh….?’
Edmund tilted his head, eyeing the woman curiously. He had no idea who she was, and so, didn’t know what to say.
‘He is my husband’ Ashton spoke up.
The woman’s eyes widened then, and her face broke into a great big smile.
‘Oh my gosh’ she bowed quickly to Edmund. ‘It’s such a pleasure to meet you. I didn’t think I’d… I mean I heard but…. oh Ashton’ she glanced towards him excitedly. ‘I’m so proud of you!’
‘Thank you’ Ashton replied curtly.
‘I’m sorry I haven’t really been told who you are’ Edmund smiled kindly to the woman.
‘My name is Clara.’
‘Right’ Edmund chuckled awkwardly.
‘Anything else you would like to know, its best if Ashton tells you himself. This is uh…. Yeah…’
‘Are you always this socially awkward?’ Edmund grinned; his tone playful.
‘Oh gosh no, is it that obvious?’ Clara said, panicking slightly. ‘I was just caught off-guard that’s all!’
‘No no its ok’ Edmund hastily reassured her. ‘It’s funny, it’s just… you remind me of Ashton, that’s all.’

‘I do?’
‘Now Edmund’ Ashton spoke up in a firm tone. ‘Why don’t you and Alicia go and see the muntjac deer? I'm sure she would love to show you.’
‘The what-jack who?’ Edmund replied.
‘Come with me’ Alicia said to him. ‘I will show you. It’s a small breed of deer, about the size of a cat. Come on. Come outside with me. Henry you too.’
‘Are you trying to get me away?’ Edmund said to Ashton, eyes narrowing in suspicion.
‘Edmund’ Ashton spoke patiently. ‘Just…do this for me. Please. I need to be alone with…Clara.’
Edmund continued to stare at him for a moment, thinking about what to do, considering the situation, before he relented.
He turned on his heel, mumbling to Henry to come along, following Alicia as she marched away from the home.
Clara hesitated for a moment, unsure of the situation. She watched them go, watched until they were out of sight, before finally closing the door.
It was just herself and Ashton alone in the spacious kitchen now, and Clara stared, unsure of what to say or do.
‘I’m going to see him now’ Ashton spoke softly.
‘Oh’ Clara nodded, hunching her shoulders, hands to her chest as she replied timidly. ‘Yes. Yes of course. I told him you…would be coming. I don’t know if he will remember though but…yes I will…make some snacks for all of you.’

Ashton watched Clara for a few seconds, before turning away.
He made his way slowly up the stairs, holding onto the banister carefully as he went.
It had been a while since Ashton had visited this place, many years in fact, and though he had been here several times before, it still felt strange to be back.
Ashton reached the top of the stairs, pausing for a moment.
He stared through the open door into the room nearest to him. It was a large room, a living area with sofas and books and a fireplace at one end of the room, which now stood cold.
Ashton saw the back of a tall wheelchair, an electric piece, he knew that it was powered by a joystick and several buttons on the arms.
On the floor sitting with his legs folded outwards, hidden from view behind the large electric wheelchair, was a figure.
Ashton lingered for a moment, staring into the room, simply listening.
The boy was talking to himself, mumbling words incoherently. He sounded happy as he played, he sounded content.
This made Ashton happy too.
He stepped into the room, walking around the wheelchair, coming to stand in front of the figure, making himself known.
‘Hey Tyler. It’s good to see you.’
‘Ashton!’
Ashton smiled at the excitement on his face. They had only met a handful of times, and for some reason Tyler really seemed to like Ashton a lot.
‘Yey you’re here! I didn’t know. Yey hooray!’
Ashton chuckled lightly at this, sitting on the carpet beside Tyler.

Tyler was a blonde-haired slender figure, he was a little underweight, not because he was not well fed, not exactly. There was always plenty of food provided for him, throughout the day, every day. But the problem was that he was a very fussy eater, obsessively so, to the point where he wouldn't eat his meal at all if any of the different foods touched. He would usually refuse to eat most foods, instead sticking to the few that he knew and loved. His favourite was jam sandwich, though he would happily eat shortbread biscuits also, all day.
Ashton noticed as he glanced up to the little table beside them, a plate of shortbread biscuits, and a cup of black tea that was now stone cold. Tyler didn't like milk.
'How have you been?' Ashton said to Tyler, grinning widely. It felt good to see him again.
'I'm good' Tyler answered, smiling widely back. 'I'm making shapes.'
'Oh cool' Ashton looked down at the carpet between them, where Tyler had been scribbling in a colouring book. Nearby was a shape-sorting toy Tyler had been playing with before he had gotten bored of it and moved onto colouring. Ashton picked up one of the little wooden pieces of the shape-sorter. 'What shape is this Tyler?'
'Round!'
'Ha ha…that's right.' Ashton pushed the shape carefully through the hole, and the wooden piece fell into the box beneath. 'You're very clever Tyler. I wouldn't have known that.'
'I know I'm smart' Tyler called out, speaking a little too loudly.
Ashton smiled again at this, dipping his head and picking another wooden shape, fitting it through another of the holes.
Tyler was the same age as Ashton, they were both seventeen, but Tyler had the mind of a child. He had been born this way, had been this way all his life, never mentally progressing past a certain stage.
But despite this, Tyler was happy, for the most part it seemed. He did have tantrums sometimes though, but that was likely due to frustration. Most of the time, he was just sweet.
Tyler continued to scribble in the book for a time, Ashton watching him silently for the most part, offering him kind words here and there. Everything he said, made Tyler smile. No matter what it was, Tyler was almost always happy.
The two simply sat together, Ashton absentmindedly playing with the wooden shapes, while Tyler turned another page of the colouring book, scribbling some more.
'Um…. Ashton dear?!' it was Clara calling from the bottom of the stairs.
He straightened up then.
'Yes?!'
'Tea is ready, and I have some sandwiches and biscuits. Could you bring Tyler down?!'
'Yes! I'll be down shortly!'
Clara went back to the kitchen.
'Are you ready for some snacks Tyler?'
'Yey I like food, I like to eat.'
'Awww?' Tyler could be so cute sometimes. 'Ok, put your arms around me, I'll lift you up.'
Tyler did as he was told, hugging Ashton tightly, if not a little awkwardly. Ashton lifted him up, turning on the spot and slowly lowering him into his wheelchair.
'Are you sitting comfortably?'
'Get my turtle.'
'Ok Tyler' Ashton chuckled, walking over to the sofa and picking up the plushie turtle, handing it to Tyler who began to make strange sounds.
These sounds meant nothing in particular, other than he was happy. They were just loud calls.

Ashton placed a small blanket across Tyler's lap, turning the wheelchair around and guiding him out of the room. Tyler seemed to be unaware now of what was happening. His attention was fully fixed on his turtle plushie, flying it through the air and making silly sounds. Ashton smirked in amusement at this as he reached the hallway, turning the wheelchair away from the stairs, heading the other way. There was a section that had been added to the house especially for Tyler, so he could reach the next floor in his wheelchair. It was an extension, a long section of hallway that sloped downwards, turning sharply at the end and coming back the other way, the end of the hallway connected to the kitchen.
Ashton stepped out of the structure, pushing Tyler along, he entered the kitchen, seeing Clara bustling around.
'Oh, there you are' Clara smiled to Ashton. 'How are you Tyler? Oh, you've got your turtle, how lovely.'
Tyler waved at her excitedly, flapping the plushie in the air as he grasped it by the fin.
'I should probably call the others in' Clara mumbled to herself. 'Do you think…' she asked Ashton uncertainly, 'that they would want to…oh maybe that's a silly question….'
'You can call them' Ashton answered simply, pushing Tyler carefully up to the table and making sure he had everything he needed before turning away.
He sat himself down at the table beside Tyler, as Clara opened the little double windows above the kitchen sink, calling out.
A few moments later, Alicia returned, with Edmund and Henry.
'Hello Tyler my sweet' Alicia called happily, immediately rushing up to him in greeting. 'It's so wonderful to see you.'
Behind her, Edmund continued to look confused, and behind him, Henry was expressionless.
'Come come' Clara beaconed them in. 'Have something to eat, would you? How do you like your tea? Did you like the deer? They are awfully sweet, aren't they?'
'Oh…yes they are' Edmund fumbled over the many questions. 'It's so strange to see…. I had no idea they were so small.'
'Muntjac deer are such dear little things. Oh! Dear! Ha ha….. sorry' she finished awkwardly. 'I get caught up in my words sometimes. Anyway, hurry and sit, I have plenty of snacks for all of you.'
Alicia was already sitting at the table on Tyler's other side.
Edmund took a seat at the table also, feeling more than a little lost and slightly uncomfortable. He glanced over towards Ashton as Henry sat mutely down.
'This is Tyler' Ashton explained. 'He's…. a friend of ours.'
'Oh' Edmund said. 'Hello Tyler, its nice to meet you. My name is Edmund.'
'Turtle!'
Edmund blinked bewildered at this; Ashton only smiled apologetically. Clara watched the interaction a little nervously, hands clutched to her chest.
'I'll…. get some cakes' she said. 'I have plenty of different kinds, you are sure to like some…or have many. Have as much as you like' she giggled shyly. 'I'll…. just go and get them.'
She hurried off, holding the skirt of her dress carefully in one hand so as not to trip.
Edmund looked back at Ashton, but he was paying no attention. Ashton was biting into a sandwich, and was carefully watching Tyler so he wouldn't make too much of a mess.
Edmund glanced to Alicia, who looked back at him curtly before looking away.
'So, what did you think of the deer?' Ashton spoke at last.
'They're…' Edmund began, 'sweet?'

The rest of that day was unusual for Edmund. Ashton and Alicia went away together quietly to another room to speak to Clara alone.
Edmund simply waited for their return, while Henry occupied himself with playing games with Tyler.
They were building a tower on the dining room table, using little wooden blocks.
Edmund had been staring silently down at his tea as this was going on, thoughts churning over in his mind. He glanced up slowly, looking over towards Tyler with a curious expression.
And he wondered.

Sometime later, Ashton returned. Alicia helped Clara clean up the kitchen, while Ashton and Edmund went outside to talk together.
'So, what is going on?'
'I um….' Ashton averted his gaze. 'It's difficult to um…. uh…'
'Who is that boy?' Edmund asked. 'Is he who you came here to visit?'
'Yes' Ashton replied after a time.
'So…. who is he?'
Ashton frowned to himself, diverting his attention then, reluctant to answer. 'He um…. He….'
'You trust me, don't you?'
'I do… I….' Ashton let out a heavy sigh.
'It's ok' Edmund spoke quietly. 'You can tell me.'
Ashton swallowed nervously.
'His….name is um…. Ashton….'
'What? I thought it was Tyler.'
Ashton hugged himself, shoulders hunched.
'I don't understand' Edmund said.
'I have a question for *you* actually' Ashton voiced then, 'when my grandmother wanted to talk to you and Henry before…' he raised his head, meeting his gaze. 'What were you talking about?'
Edmund stared back at him hard, mouth slightly open in surprise. He gritted his teeth, turning away now.
'It was nothing' Edmund muttered offhandedly.
'So, you won't tell me?'
'There's nothing to tell.'
'I trust you Edmund' Ashton said to him. 'Don't you trust me?'
'I do trust you' Edmund replied shortly, becoming irritated now. 'I'm telling you it was nothing. If there is something you want to know from her, ask her yourself.'
Ashton stared back at Edmund, taken aback and feeling a little wounded.
He dipped his head sharply, glaring at the gravel at his feet, blinking back tears.
'We're…going home soon.'
'Fine' Edmund said.
'The…. car will be along shortly to pick us up.'
'Fine' Edmund said again.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ashton returned home. Unfortunately, Alicia insisted that she had to go home too, she said she had to return to her husband and her babies. Ashton was deeply disappointed to see her go, but soon enough had to wave goodbye to her as she got into the car, watching sadly as she waved back. Standing either side of him, Isaac and Maya cried hysterically, bawling into handkerchiefs, Ashton flinched slightly at the dreadful wailing sounds that they made.
Ashton turned away from his parents, ignoring them as they both continued to sob, watching as the car driving Alicia pulled away slowly.
Ashton walked up to the steps of his home. Approaching Edmund who stood leaning against the doorframe of the open front door, arms crossed and a level expression on his face.
'So what now?' Edmund asked his husband.
'I need to be alone.'
'I hope its nothing I've done wrong' Edmund said to him, as Ashton made to walk past him.
'No' Ashton replied. 'I just…. need time by myself for a while. I need to think about things.'
Edmund stared at the back of Ashton's head as he walked away across the hall, and then out of sight. Edmund stared at the spot he had last seen Ashton, doing so for several minutes, and frowning silently to himself. He too had a lot to think about.

Unbeknown to Edmund, Ashton had made his way right through the manor and back outside. He traversed the garden, heading along one of the winding gravel paths at the edge of the property, before making his way out, and into the surrounding city.

A short time later, and he was sitting inside the dancing studio, the place was empty, save for himself, and Lucile.
'I'm glad you came to see me.'
'Of course I would' Lucile smiled back, his expression that of concern as he watched Ashton closely. 'You're my good friend. Why wouldn't I come to see you?'
Ashton chuckled lightly at that, hugging his knees to his chest.
The two of them sat on the floor of the studio, the mirror that covered the entire wall on one side was behind them now, and the room was dimmed.
Lucile had arrived to the club shortly after Ashton had. The place had been closed for hours, but Ashton was one of the few people that Michelle trusted with the key. Even after he had gotten married, Ashton continued to carry it around him at all times, wherever he went. He would only take it off to sleep and wash.
Ashton had been so relieved to seen his friend, suddenly overcome with joy and a strange sense of nostalgia.
The two of them had danced briefly together before sitting down to talk. It had felt good just the two of them. The music they had played to dance to was silent now, and the only sounds were the boys themselves.
'You've never been gone from us for long' Lucile spoke out of the blue.
'Hm?' Ashton blinked. 'What do you mean?'

‘You’ve always come back’ Lucile smiled widely, genuinely. ‘And for that…I’m so thankful.’
‘Are you afraid that I will leave? Forever I mean?’
‘Yeah’ Lucile hugged his knees then, rocking back and forth gently. ‘I won’t lie, it’s something that’s been on my mind for a time. It’s something that’s had me worried.’

It began to get dark, and Ashton eventually said goodbye to Lucile, locking up the place, before heading back towards the main street.
Here he found Edmund waiting for him.
‘Why are you here?’
‘You say it like you’re disappointed to see me’ Edmund replied. ‘Or annoyed maybe?’
‘It’s not that.’ Ashton stepped closer.
A silence passed between them, and the two watched each other closely.
‘I just wanted to um…’ Edmund glanced away, ‘I just wanted to be with you.’
Ashton stared at him for a moment, before looking away too.
‘Come on’ Ashton said. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

They left together, wandering the streets randomly.
Ashton at that moment didn’t feel truly himself. Everything just felt so strange to him at that time, like nothing was real, like nothing around him was truly a part of *his life* anymore.
‘Ashton?’ Edmund asked him. ‘Are you ok?’
Ashton didn’t answer, instead he jumped up on top of the low wall they had been walking alongside, his movements were nimble and catlike. He began to prance along the top of the wall, Edmund on the pavement beside hurrying after him, until they reached the streetlight. Ashton grasped it firmly, beginning to swing slowly around it.
The stars in the nights sky turning overhead.
It was dark now, and it was just himself and Edmund out in the streets. There were only a few visible lights dotted here and there about the city. For the most part, it was dark and silent and eerie.
Edmund moved a short distance away, sitting heavily down on a bench close by, slumping back with his hands in his pockets. After a time, Ashton sat down too, choosing to remain on the wall, maintaining the distance between them.
‘What is really going on?’ Edmund voiced. ‘And who is Tyler? Or Ashton…. or whatever he’s really called?’
Ashton buried his face in his hands then, beginning to cry silently.
‘I can’t say….’ He sobbed. ‘I can’t…’
‘Hey…’ Edmund started, rising and moving swiftly over to him. ‘I’m sorry’ he whispered, ‘ok?’
‘I just feel so confused right now’ Ashton mumbled, wiping away his tears.
Unsure of what else to say, Edmund said this.
‘Let’s go back to the dancing studio. I want to see you dance again, this time in full costume, and full makeup.’

It was just the two of them together in the world now. Nothing else mattered at that time, and nothing else even existed.
Ashton had his own little drawer within the studio, tucked away in one of the back rooms. His very own. It even had his name on it, and he was very proud of this little thing he owned.
Here he had several different costumes. Choosing one at random he dressed quickly, heading over to Michelle's draw now for the makeup.
He applied it as best he could, the same way Michelle had done for him so many times before, but what felt like a lifetime ago now. He had done his own makeup several times when he danced at the club, but it was never as good as hers. He still thought, as he gazed at his reflection in the mirror, that he looked beautiful.

He had a mask of sparkling pink painted around his eyes, fading to the natural colour of his skin, with bold yellow lips.
The bright colours suited him, suited his pale skin, his blue eyes. He had found his old wig again, an expensive and realistic piece, of pure white hair, tied as a ponytail over his shoulder, reaching his hip and tied in red ribbons. The outfit he wore now to dance was black, a close-fitting garment that covered his chest and was high-necked but left his shoulders and stomach bare. There were tight black sleeves on his arms, he wore black shorts, and on his feet were high black stilettoes.
Ashton turned and marched out of the backroom, his heels clicking on the floor as he went.
He went now, to find Edmund waiting for him in the main studio.
He went now, to dance his last dance.

His last dance, before everything for him changed forever.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Ashton and Edmund left the studio sometime later, returning to the manor.
It was fully dark now, and Ashton held Edmund's hand as they walked up the stairs together. The only light came now from one of the rooms down the corridor, where Isaac and Maya were watching a loud cowboy movie. The sounds of gunshots could be heard from that room, horses neighing, men shouting.
As they walked onwards together, the sounds from the movie became muffled until they could no longer be heard at all.
Ashton brought Edmund back to his old room, closing the door after them. It was just as he had left it.
Ashton turned to his husband then, kissing him, savouring the moment, hands roving over his body. Ashton allowed himself to be touched in turn.
They moved over towards the bed, Ashton allowing himself to be pushed back onto the sheets, Edmund bearing over him, hand moving down Ashton's body, slipping beneath his belt.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Early the next morning, Veronica passed away.
The news came as a shock to Ashton, and when he came down for breakfast, he heard Maya in tears. When he entered the breakfast hall, he saw Isaac holding his mother, comforting her, his expression sombre.
His father delivered the news. Ashton was shocked into silence.

He cried for hours after that, unable to come to terms with what had happened. The funeral was the very next day, and so many people, members of the family, had all gathered at such short notice. The only one who was absent, was Alicia.
Ashton had expected his sister to come, but Edmund had told him, that Alicia had been delayed due to the ferry.
Ashton didn't understand, but he didn't question it, he couldn't, his mouth was dry and there was a lump in his throat. He felt so broken. Despite how his grandmother had treated him, had always treated him, the loss had hit him hard.
Ashton stood alone now in the crowd, dressed all in black as everyone else around him was also. He glanced up towards the elevated platform at the head of the hall, where he saw Edmund speaking with Lisa.
His attention lingered on them both for a moment, and he wondered what they were talking about. He wondered what Edmund had to say to Lisa, his grandmother's personal servant.
He continued to watch them, they seemed to be in deep discussion.
Ashton was broken out of his trance then by his mother who had sidled up to him.
'Are you ok dear?' she said to him unhappily.
Ashton took the glass of wine she offered him, taking a slow sip from it, as Maya cradled her own glass.
'Yes' Ashton replied. 'I'm…I'm ok…'
He looked past her, seeing his father elsewhere in the crowd, he was talking to other family members.
'It's a shame to have the family together for such an unhappy day' Maya lamented.
Ashton watched her, but her attention was far away, eyes glazed over, staring at nothing in particular.
'I um…am sorry Alicia couldn't make it' Maya went on, facing Ashton at last. 'I know she wanted to be here.'
'Yeah' Ashton replied, his voice cracking slightly. 'It's…a shame.'
'She tried but…' Maya shook her head.
A figure moved beside Ashton then, and he glanced around, surprised to see Edmund standing there.

‘Edmund…. what?’
He hadn’t realised Edmund had moved through the crowd towards him, hadn’t realised he was close.
When Ashton looked to Edmund, he faltered, seeing his husband’s expression.
Edmund seemed incredibly tense, jaw clenched, brow furrowed.
Ashton heard his mother speak up then.
‘What is Tyler doing here?’ Maya said.
Ashton’s attention abruptly snapped towards the head of the hall; his heart jolted in his chest as he saw Tyler sitting in his wheelchair at the head of the hall. Beside him stood Lisa.
At this point, the other guests were beginning to notice, one by one their attention fell upon this new boy. No one knew who he was, save for Ashton and those immediately close to him, and Lisa of course.
‘What is he doing here?’ Ashton uttered.
‘I’m sorry’ Edmund spoke suddenly, voice strained.
Ashton was more confused than ever as he glanced towards Edmund, but Edmund would not meet his gaze.
And then Lisa began to tap repeatedly a wineglass with a little spoon, the ringing echoing through the hall slowly got the attention of the family members, and gradually, complete silence fell like a blanket over their ears.
Lisa put the wineglass and spoon down upon a nearby table, before moving back into the centre of the raised platform, standing beside Tyler now, who remained in his wheelchair, completely oblivious to what was going on around him. He continued to play with two plastic aeroplanes he held, one in each hand, crashing them together on his lap and making strange sounds as he did so.
Ashton had rarely heard Lisa speak, but she did so now, speaking loudly and with confidence.
‘Everyone! I have an announcement.’ She declared. ‘This is Veronica’s final wish.’

Ashton’s heart sank deeper in his chest, and he felt a strong sense of fear and despair closing in around him.
He had no idea what was happening, but he was positive it would not be good for him.
He knew that his grandmother had hated him. And he remembered then, Edmund having a private talk with his grandmother. She had seemed to like Edmund a lot.
What had they talked about? What was her final wish? And did she really share such a thing with Edmund? Who was not even family to her?
And then Ashton remembered Henry, the servant Edmund had brought along. He and Lisa had been close to one another for days before any of this. What had they been talking about? What was about to happen? What was about to be said?
‘A secret has been kept for the longest time from all of you’ Lisa spoke loudly then, addressing every member of the family within the large hall. ‘And there is something you should know…’
‘Lisa what are you doing?!’ Ashton called out to her in panic, a few of the people around him glanced his way in confusion.
But Lisa completely ignored his cries, turning her head away from him, she continued to speak.
‘As you know, the heir of the family, Veronica’s heir, is Ashton. But he is not as you know him to be.’ Lisa moved closer to Tyler then, placing her hand upon the wheelchair, continuing to speak as he completely ignored her, continuing to play with the toy aeroplanes. ‘The true

Ashton Lucius Miles, is this boy here' Lisa declared. 'And the true name of the boy you believe to be the son of Maya and Isaac, is actually Tyler Scott.'
A murmur began to ripple through the crowd, people glancing from Ashton to Tyler and back again, towards Isaac and Maya too.
'The real Ashton has the mind of a child, despite being nearly eighteen' Lisa went on. She paused only briefly to glance down at the boy, who clearly had no idea what was going on, instead repeatedly crashed the toy aeroplanes together, making peculiar sounds as he did so. It would have been obvious to anyone that there was something not quite right about him. 'Ashton here' Lisa continued, 'has a myriad of health issues, as well as being unable to walk. It's a miracle he's even lived this long' she added quietly. 'He has surpassed all of the doctor's expectations.' Lisa spoke clearly again, raising her head as her voice rang out through the hall. 'As you can see, he is not a suitable heir to the family name.' The crowd began to look to one another, still processing slowly what they were being told. This was all so sudden and unexpected. 'Maya is not the woman Veronica wanted her son to marry. But Isaac disobeyed. I'm sure some of you remember the wedding that was interrupted many years ago.'
She fell silent for a moment, watching the crowd. Within it, Ashton had gone completely cold, frozen to the spot. His face white as a sheet. Gradually, his entire world, the whole life that had been created for him since before he could even remember, all came crashing down.
Isaac and Maya simply stood in stunned silence, watching events unfold.
'Ashton was the last child Maya was able to produce, and as you all know, the family name can only be carried on by a male heir.'
Lisa turned to look towards Maya now, her eyebrow twitched slightly as she continued to speak.
'Coming from a commoners background' Lisa went on, speaking clearly, 'Maya was able to easily enough find a friend of hers, who was willing to swap her young child with Maya's. This other woman would care for her disabled son, while her own son, who was healthy and fit, would be raised in wealth and opportunity. And so, it was done, their names were swapped with one another's.'
Oh my god Ashton thought abruptly, the sudden realisation hitting him like icy water. *This is what Edmund and Veronica must have been talking about. This was all planned….by Veronica!*
'How could you do this to me?' Ashton sobbed, unable to control himself as he turned to speak to his husband. '*How could you do this….?!*'
'I think you should be true to who you really are' Edmund replied.
'What?'
Edmund turned away from him then, marching forwards through the crowd, heading towards Lisa.
'The family name has been passed to Edmund now that he is married' Lisa continued, as Edmund took his place beside her at the head of the hall, marching up the steps slowly and turning to face the crowd. 'And there is something else.'
Projected on the wall behind them suddenly, from the device hanging from the ceiling, was a picture of Ashton in all his costume, dancing around a pole.
It lingered there for a moment. The crowd seemed unsure at first what they were seeing.
Edmund had taken this picture in secret; Ashton had had no idea.
The next photo however Ashton recognised immediately. It was the photo Edmund had taken of him, before Edmund knew who he was, back when Ashton had given him a private showing.

'How could you be in a club like this, seducing men when you're supposed to be getting married?' Edmund spoke accusingly.
'No, it isn't like that!' Ashton said beginning to panic. 'It's just a hobby. It's an art! It's not supposed to be physical in any way…' Ashton begun to rub his eyes with the back of his hand, smudging his makeup. 'It isn't like that….'

He could take no more, turning away sharply from what he saw.
Ashton felt physically sick then, and he fell to his knees in shock, hands clapped over his mouth, trying not to throw up as his fear and panic began to overwhelm him.
'A person like this cannot be accepted into the family' Lisa stated, staring at the photo projected on the wall, for a few moments, before facing the crowd again. 'The true Tyler Scott is no longer a part of the family. A divorce is inevitable now' Lisa went on, not missing a beat. 'And because of this, Edmund Rodrigo Miles who had taken on the family name, is free to re-marry.'
Lisa stepped back, indicating a figure that had stepped out into the open. This new figure was now the centre of everyone's attention.
'Let me introduce you all' Lisa said clearly, 'to Christina.'
The woman raised her head as her name was spoken, taking her place on the platform and looking down proudly over the guests below her. She was dressed in daring gold, hair beautifully woven. She was an incredibly beautiful woman.
'You!' Isaac cried out then. 'What are you doing here?!'
'I am going to marry Edmund' the woman spoke boldly back. 'Unlike you, he has accepted me.'
And just as she said this, she reached a hand towards Edmund, who took hers tenderly in his own. She moved to stand closer to him, and he put his arm around her. As the others watched, they saw a small child hurry towards the woman, grabbing onto the skirt of her dress and hiding behind her shyly. Christina glanced down at the child with a smile, placing a hand lovingly upon his curly hair. It was her son. A healthy and smiling boy.
'Together we will maintain the strength of this family' Christina called out, her voice strong and powerful. 'We will grow and be strong, just as things were supposed to have been…. all those years before.'
'Is this all true?!' one of the family members near the front of the hall spoke up, 'is this all that she says true?!'
She was addressing Maya now, and as Maya took a slow and steady breath, tears running down her cheeks, she spoke at last, forcing herself to do so loudly so that all could hear.
'Its true!' she said.
'Edmund…did you ever truly love me….?'
Tyler could take no more. He rose to his feet then, rushing from the hall.
He pushed through the crowed, desperate to escape, to get away from all of this.
One saving grace, was that Alicia was not around to see this, and for that, he was thankful.

Tyler had expected Alicia to come, but Edmund had told him, that Alicia had been delayed due to the ferry.

He remembered Edmund's words then.
'She will be here tomorrow instead.'

Chapter Thirty-Six

Tyler ran from the manor, escaping its grounds.
He went to the only other place he could feel safe in this world.
The dance studio.
He carried the keys with him at all times, and let himself in.

Michelle found him here the next morning, kneeling before him and touching him on the shoulder gently.
Tyler who had been fast asleep, head in his arms and hugging his knees to his chest, raised his head, blinking wearily up at his dance teacher, momentarily forgetting where he was.
And then all the memories came flooding back.
Tyler burst into tears, and Michelle held him then, cradling him in her arms. She had no idea what had upset him, Tyler was unable to talk for the longest time.
But he felt so glad that Michelle was there. He felt so glad that he was not alone anymore.

A few hours later, Sophia and Christa appeared, Lucile did too, a short time after that.
As the girls danced, Tyler and Lucile spoke quietly together.
'So, your real name is Tyler Scott' Lucile was saying, his eyes distant. 'All this time….'
'I'm sorry to have kept it a secret from you' Tyler said. 'I didn't mean…. I just… I had to…'
'No no I understand' Lucile hastened. 'You don't need to apologise.'
Tyler turned to face him, simply smiling at him.
'Thanks Lucile.'

Tyler lived at the studio for many months, throughout this time, he was visited my Alicia often. Despite the great distance, she made the effort to see him whenever she could, and she kept him informed of current affairs within her family.
Christina was pregnant with Edmund's child. Everything seemed to have settled down. The family had accepted the way things were now, and all seemed to be well.
Oh Edmund, Tyler thought to himself miserably as beside him Alicia continued to speak. *Did you ever truly love me?*
This thought was the one thing that plagued him more than anything else.
Tyler rarely left the studio now, and whenever Alicia came to visit him, they would stay indoors.
Tyler felt a certain sort of comfort within these walls, and it was a long time before he was willing to leave.
When he finally did, he did so with Lucile by his side.

A few weeks later, a day after Lucile's birthday, he finally admitted his feelings for Tyler, the feelings he had kept hidden away for so long. It all came spilling out.

About a week or so later, Tyler returned to his true home. He was greeted by his true mother, who for the first time since he was a young child, could hold him and embrace him and tell him how much she loved and had missed him.
They did not need to maintain a façade anymore.
'*I've missed you so much my boy!*' Clara sobbed, holding him so tightly, as if afraid that if she let him go, he would float away and disappear forever.
'Mama' Tyler sobbed too, unable to hold back the tears. 'I've missed you so much too.'

Tyler remained living in this home for many more weeks, catching up on lost time with his beloved mother.
In these days that passed, Lucile visited often.
Tyler introduced him to his mother, and admitted his feelings in turn.
He was in love with Lucile, as Lucile was in love with him.
And then came the day where Tyler finally admitted to his mother, what his secret passion was.
Heavily encouraged by Lucile, who had continued to visit as often as he could. Tyler had finally given in.
Clara at first didn't seem to know what to make of it, and then one day when Tyler returned home from a shopping trip, he found a dancing pole installed in one of the rooms.
'I thought that maybe we could move some of the furniture out' Clara was mumbling awkwardly, holding her hand together and averting her eyes. 'We could move this stuff to one of the other rooms. That would give you plenty of space to dance yes? Oh gosh the man who installed it was giving me such peculiar looks. I'm sure it wasn't my imagination! He must have thought this was for me! It was so embarrassing.'
She covered her face in her hands now, unable to look at the room any longer. Unable to look at the pole.
She glanced up however when Tyler stepped forwards, giving her a warm embrace.
'I love you mum' he said, tears of joy in his eyes. 'I love you…'

Later that day, he got into costume and danced for her.
Clara still seemed a little flustered, unsure of what to make of it all.
'It's…. very impressive' she said when Tyler had finished his routine. She had sat in the single chair watching the dance, fiddling with the handkerchief in her hands awkwardly. 'You've very strong to be able to lift your body like that.'
Tyler let go of the pole, panting slightly now.
'You're really ok with this?'
'Well…' Clara hunched her shoulders, scratching the back of her head. 'I can't say I entirely approve. Its still so new to me but…it this is what makes you happy, I support you.'

A few months after this, Tyler returned to the city. Lucile had moved out of his family home by that point, and was renting a place of his own. Tyler had moved in with him, they lived together now, and worked to earn to pay their bills.
'I'm very happy that everything turned out as it did' Tyler said one day, as they sat side by side on the beach, looking out at the ocean waves as the sun began to set. 'I was so scared at first. But I feel so much more myself.' He sighed contentedly. 'I don't have to hide anything anymore. So much good has come from this…. for everyone.'
Lucile turned to him, smiling widely.
'What are you going to do now?' Lucile asked.
'I want to travel the world.'
'How would you afford that?'
'My sister has been helping me, she's been giving me enough money to save up over these last few months.' He paused then, staring down at his lap. 'I don't care what has happened, as far as I am concerned, she is still my sister, and I love her.'
Lucile watched him for a time, before turning away, looking towards the horizon.
'So, you want to travel the world to dance?'
'And take you with me of course' Tyler added.
Lucile dipped his head, smiling silently at that.
'I still have not met Alicia's children' Tyler voiced. 'That would be the first thing I would do.'
'Oh?'
'For so long' Tyler continued, 'I've truly wanted to live, to be *myself*.' He chuckled lightly then. 'I guess in the end we all got what we want, even if it didn't turn out how we expected.'
'How is Edmund doing?' Lucile asked.
'He is married now.'
A silence passed between them.
The gentle waves continued to roll up the shore, before falling back again, in their never-ending rhythm.
'I can't wait to see the world' Lucile whispered, hunching his shoulders excitedly. 'I can't wait to see what's out there.'
'We can travel for as long as we want together' Tyler said to him. 'After all…'
He reached out, taking Lucile's hand in his own.
'…. everything I want, is already right here.'

Epilogue

My name is Tyler Scott, and I am just a regular kid with a dream. My family is small, but it is precious to me.
I have no father, but my mother loves me very much, and I love her. I am an only child.

The last few weeks of my life have been very strange for me. I became engaged, and all too soon I had been married. It had all happened so fast. Even now I sometimes can't believe all of that happened.
I loved Edmund, I truly did. It took a while, but I had come to truly love him, and as soon as I admitted these feeling to myself about him, everything changed.
Edmund and I are no longer together. I've lost my adopted family. I don't see Isaac and Maya anymore, and its so strange to me now that all of this is out in the open. But…. I think this is all for the best. Despite how hard its been, despite how hard it was to come to terms with what has happened, despite all of this, I am happy.
I still keep in close contact with Alicia. I don't care what has changed, I don't care. She is still my sister in my eyes, and I am still her brother in hers.

I lived a life of luxury for so long, surrounded by wealth.
But I want none of that, I never truly did. All I want is to live a normal life, and to dance. That's all I want; I want my life to be my own. To truly be my own, and for the first time, it is.

I live a normal life now, and am able to dance as much as I want. I don't even have to keep it a secret anymore.
My life is my own. Is truly my own.
And with Lucile by my side…...

……. Nothing will stand in our way.

Epilogue II

Tyler and Lucile remained together for the rest of their lives. They spent their first few years travelling the world together, before finally settling down and getting married.
They opened their own pole dancing studio, and taught many over the years before eventually retiring.
Tyler died peacefully in his bed late one morning, aged eighty years. Lucile died a few hours later.
The two were buried together, and their estate was passed onto Edmund and Christina's children.